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Chapter 1- Open Your Eyes

Rainkit was what Riverclan called a 'late bloomer.' She didn't open her eyes after the usual few days after birth. Oh, of course she listened, she felt, she observed everything around her; but for some reason she just felt like she shouldn't open her eyes.

Not yet, anyways.

Her mother, Skyheart, would often speak to her, begging her to open her eyes and face the world, but she just... didn't want to. She had a bad feeling, although she didn't know exactly what was bad about opening her eyes.

Finally one day her father, Strongsoul, had been discussing Rainkit's 'condition' with Skyheart.

"Dreamsong says that they should've been open by now!" Her father was what Rainkit considered to be aggressive, or something close to it, because of how he would speak to her mother. He was mean to her sometimes, but she thinks that's just because she wouldn't open her eyes. Strongsoul was probably just worried that she might become an apprentice later than normal.

"She will open her eyes when she's ready!" Her mother would snap, usually followed by a hitch in her voice.

"Why does she look like that, anyways?" Her father would whisper. Rainkit wondered what they were talking about. Did she look funny? She didn't really know what you were supposed to look like, since she had never opened her eyes.

"How would I know? She isn't colored normally... and you said Dreamsong spoke to the other medicine cats? What did they say?"

"They don't know anything, either! I wonder why Starclan sent her to us... she's not our kit."

Rainkit was filled with curiosity. What did her mother and father look like? What did she look like, for her parents to be so worried about her? Maybe she should just open her eyes. She felt her paws twitch at the thought.

"Oh, it looks like she's awake! Do you think today's the day...?" Her mother sounded excited. Yes, Rainkit knew this was the right choice. She wanted her mother to be happy.

How did she open her eyes again?

After a moment of panic, she finally found the right muscles and she opened her eyes to her parents.

Skyheart was pretty, that's the first thought she had about her mother. She had long, tan fur with blue eyes. She was so... huge! She towered over Rainkit with an expression she couldn't name.

Her father, Strongsoul, was similar in coloring to Skyheart, but he had ginger markings on his back and face. He was even taller than her mother! He had the same expression as her mother... what was it again? It was right on the tip of her little tongue.

Oh yeah.

Horror.

"M-Mother? What's wrong?"

Skyheart looked away. She wouldn't meet Rainkit's eyes, and now neither would Strongsoul.

"Why won't you look at me?" Rainkit was upset now. They were supposed to be happy now! She had finally opened her eyes; she could become a tough warrior for Riverclan now! If only they would look at her!

They both walked out of the den; Skyheart called it the nursery. Did that mean she could walk out too? Was she supposed to stay inside...? They hadn't said no...

Rainkit, with a little grunt, leapt out of the nest, and padded out on

wobbly paws into the clearing. Skyheart had described to her what everything looked like, but it was like telling someone what a mother's milk tasted like. It was something you had to experience for yourself.

The... sun was really bright. It shone in a... blue sky, with little puffy white things that she remembered to be clouds from Skyheart's long one-sided conversations with her back when it was normal for her eyes to still be closed.

Lower down, back on the ground, there was so much going on! There were cats like Skyheart and Strongsoul, only they were all sorts of different colors, all different sizes... Rainkit wondered what she looked like. Maybe she could ask a cat if there were any puddles or those things that Skyheart had spoken of, where fish come from... streams! Yes, she should go ask for directions to one of those!

There was a big white tom not too far away from her, cleaning his fur, which was dripping with water. What was he doing? Then Rainkit remembered Skyheart saying how fish lived in the water, and they had to get wet to catch them. This cat was a warrior! Rainkit hoped she looked like him one day! But first, she had to know what she looked like...

She padded up to the tom, a little more steady on her paws now.

"Um... excuse me, but could you show me where a puddle is? I wanna see what I look like!" She had tried to be quiet, but her excitement had edged into her voice and it came out like a squeak at the end. The tom turned around, his blue eyes wide with shock.

"You must be Rainkit! Nice to meet you, I'm Iceheart." The tom hadn't really looked at her yet, still cleaning his fur.

"You said you want a puddle, eh? I'm pretty sure I was soaked enough to have created one... ah, here one is!" He was still cleaning himself, he pointed to a rather large puddle with his tail. Rainkit was so excited! She would finally know how she looked, and how awesome she would be as a warrior!

The water reflected the sun, and at first that's all she could see. Rainkit squinted, and looked into the water.

That was her?! She looked... scary! Her face... it was two different colors! One side was like Skyheart and Strongsoul's, with tan fur, but her face was split right down the middle... the other side of her face was pure black. And her eyes... her eyes were different colors, too! The tan side held a blue orb, and the black side, a green. Even her nose was split into two colors...

No wonder her parents had looked at her with horror. *She* was looking at herself with horror!

Rainkit was just staring at herself now, too stunned to bring her head back, even though her neck was aching. Iceheart looked over at her, concerned, and flinched when he saw her.

"Oh. No wonder Skyheart was such a mess earlier... poor Strongsoul." Iceheart padded away to a group of younger looking cats, and was pointing his tail over at her. Some cats peeked at her, all flinching, wincing... pitying her parents.

What was wrong with her?! Was she really that ugly?

"You're not ugly, if that's what you're thinking, Rainkit."

Rainkit turned around to see a huge, fluffy white she-cat. Her white fur seemed to reflect the sunlight just like the puddle.

"I'm the leader of Riverclan, Glowstar. Welcome to Riverclan, little kit. I was told you had never been given a proper welcoming."

Rainkit said nothing, though she did stop glancing back at the puddle, at the reflection of her split face.

"Let's say we head over to my den? I have a few things to discuss with you, Rainkit."

Chapter 2- Wait, No, Just Keep Them Closed

Glowstar led Rainkit to a cave. It was smallish, but it only had to hold her and her mate, whoever that was. It was also really dusty. How did this cat sleep at night with all of the little motes floating everywhere? Rainkit would never know.

The leader settled down, so she copied her and sat back, licking her chest fur. She was alone with the leader of Riverclan! She wondered what they were going to talk about. Maybe what her warrior name would be? That would be so cool!

"Now, Rainkit, it's about your name..." Glowstar started. She knew it! She was going to be Rainflash, or maybe Rainstrike! There were so many choices... maybe she would be named Rainsoul after her father or Rainheart after her mother!

"Now, your mother thinks you need a... a different name."

Wait, what?

She was Rainkit, what did Glowstar mean, different name?!

"I just thought you should know before I announce it to the clan... from now on you will be known as Splitkit."

"Because of my ugly face?" she deadpanned. Rainkit felt... dirty. Maybe she didn't deserve the name Rainkit.

Glowstar looked startled, but said nothing to deny it. She instead got up and walked out, calling the clan to a meeting. Rain-Splitkit didn't get up, though, but just sat there. She was a freak. She was an abomination. Her face... she was two different cats.

After another moment of these thoughts, she sank to the dusty floor. Why had Starclan made her like this? What had she done to deserve

this?

"...from now on will be known as Splitkit." Glowstar's voice drifted into the cave, and Splitkit flinched. Why, oh why, did she look like this...?

No cat looked at her as she padded towards the nursery, but she looked at each of them, begging them to just glance at her. She didn't even care anymore, if she was pitied, flinched at... she just wanted cats to acknowledge her, not pretend she wasn't there!

Sadly, that is all that happened for five moons. She would look at cats; Glowstar, Iceheart, Skyheart, Strongsoul... nobody looked at her. She had to grab her own food, sleep in her own nest; Skyheart having already gone back to the Warriors den.

Splitkit had often heard her father speak about her to his friends with hushed tones, the scowls from the elders.

"Back in my day," one of the elders, Flowerwilt, had hissed to Skyheart one day, "we would've given her to the rouges or the kittypets. She doesn't look like a clan cat any more than a mouse does!"

Splitkit felt disgusted, exactly as she had for the past five moons. She felt like she was barely even a cat, more like an insect, or a burr on some one's pelt.

"That's actually not a bad idea," one of her mother's friends, Dawnlight, had whispered, glancing over to the nursery, unaware that Splitkit was listening and watching through a crack in the reeds.

"What do you mean, Dawnlight? You think we should give her up to the kittypets?"

"Well... yeah. It's not like anyone will want to take her on as an apprentice... what do you think about it, Skyheart?"

Her heart felt sore when her mother nodded her head, actually thinking about it!

"I'll go talk to Glowstar about it, now."

No! Splitkit didn't want to be a kittypet! She wanted to be a warrior! She wanted to be big and strong, to get to the point where cats respected her, even if she did look the way she did.

After her meal, Splitkit couldn't help but be stunned by what she had heard. No way would Strongsoul be okay with this... would he...? She honestly didn't know. She didn't know him well enough. She only knew enough from when she had listened from the reeds of the nursery, too ashamed to walk out into the clearing except to go to the dirtplace and to grab her food.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather underneath the overhang for a clan meeting!" Glowstar's yowl rang throughout the clearing... this couldn't be about her, could it? The leader wouldn't have agreed to her becoming a kittypet so easily... surely she would've sat on it for a while, or taken into consideration how Splitkit felt about it?

Again, she just watched from the cracks in the reeds. The whole clan was gathered around the little path that hung a couple of tail-lengths over the rest of the clearing, something she overheard being called... erosion? Something like that.

"I am calling you here today to discuss Splitkit's fate. Skyheart had stated that she wishes for us to give her to the kittypets."

There were a lot of murmurs. Not all happy sounding, but there were no disruptions saying that Splitkit was a cat just like them and her opinion mattered. No, none of that.

"I was thinking, however, that we take her to the gathering, which commences tomorrow night, and offer her up to the other clans. Maybe we could trade her for land or food."

"But we don't need food," one cat, Iceheart, she thought, protested.

"Maybe not, but what would you rather have, Splitkit stay here? Are you willing to mentor her?"

Splitkit begged him, begged Starclan, prayed, and did everything,

just to have Iceheart say yes, that he would mentor her if she was allowed to stay in Riverclan. That she wouldn't be like herbs, traded for something in return.

Iceheart sat down from his standing position and said nothing, bowing his head down.

"Then it is settled. Tomorrow night, we will bring her to the gathering to be traded for land..."

And like that, Splitkit's fate was sealed. She would not be a Riverclan cat, would not grow up knowing her mother and father, to become leader or a queen. She might even become a kittypet, because who was she kidding? If all of Riverclan didn't want her, why would any other clan?

Now for the first time, she wished she had never opened her eyes.

Chapter 3- Am I Good Enough?

Splitkit was sitting in the Nursery, her head under her paws, which were covering her ears. Right outside were her mother and father, who were arguing because Skyheart had gone to Glowstar about giving her up without telling Strongsoul first.

"What, so you're saying that you want her to stay here, without a mentor, forever?" Her mother had never sounded this angry before, and her father wasn't helping. Splitkit just wanted to go out there and tell her parents that she was sorry that she looked the way she did, but she had done that once before, around three moons ago. They had been fighting because Skyheart didn't want to feed Splitkit her milk anymore, but Strongsoul didn't want her to because then he would have to bring fish home for Splitkit, too.

"Leaf-fall is coming quickly," her father had argued, "and we can't give fish to a cat that won't ever repay us! It's like giving our food to the owls, because we want to."

Splitkit had scampered out of the nest to tell her parents it was okay, that she would clean the elders' pelts or help with the reeds for the nests, but all she had gotten as a reply was a sharp cuff to the head.

"Get back in the Nursery, Splitkit! Nobody wants to look at you right now," her mother had turned very bitter, after that. From what Splitkit had gathered, her mother had been one of the prettiest cats in the clan, and one of the nicest, too.

But, of course, no cat had told her for certain, she only learned through the cracks in the reeds.

The sky was changing from blue to purples and pinks, the air humid and little breeze to offer relief from the bugs that nipped and bit at their fur. Splitkit was nervous. Technically, she was supposed to be made an apprentice tomorrow, but everyone in the clan, including her, knew that wasn't going to happen. Who in Starclan would take

her to their clan, if Riverclan didn't want to? She was mentally preparing herself for the life of the kittypet, of the horrible stories she had heard about how they went to someplace called a 'cutter' and never came back the same. She didn't want that life! She wanted to be a warrior, and fight for her clan.

"Splitkit, it's about time to leave," Glowstar called from the entrance to the den, not looking at her, per usual, and giving her a wide girth as she padded towards the fresh-kill pile for her last fish. She was halfway there when Batwing, the clan snot nose, blocked her path.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"Uh, grabbing a fish?" Batwing was pretty small for a warrior, and Splitkit had heard she was big for her age, but there was still a huge difference.

"After tonight, you won't even be Riverclan. Besides, what had you done to earn that last fish?" Splitkit had to hold back her words of anger. She was never allowed to earn anything! She had asked Glowstar countless times if there was anything she could help with, but she was always just told to stay away from everyone.

Glaring at Batwing, she padded away from the juicy looking fish and padded towards Glowstar, who apparently had been watching the whole thing. Great leader, she was.

As they were walking out of the clearing, Splitkit noticed that neither her mother nor father was going to the Gathering. She guessed neither one of them cared about her enough to know her fate.

This was her first time out of the territory, but she didn't bother to look around. This wouldn't be her territory, and she had never really cared to look around in the first place. They passed countless small streams, leaping over them in huge bounds that left Splitkit panting and with a wet hind leg. She was in the back of the group, of course, but no one even looked back at her. If she wanted to, she could just walk away right now, but all that would do is make her look like a fish-brain. She didn't know which way was the edge of their territory, or where she could hide without being found.

Probably nowhere, but she was too smart to do that. Best thing she could do for herself right now was follow along and be quiet.

They finally reached the end of the Riverclan territory, crossing scent markers onto what she was pretty sure was Windclan's territory, because the trees faded into grassy waves that glimmered in the last of the sun's rays.

On the horizon she could see the four huge oak trees that must be Fourtrees, and her paws felt even heavier. She was so tired... she still had to go that far?! Splitkit knew better than to ask any cat ahead of her for help, or at least for a conversation to distract her, but she had never been in a conversation before, just heard them. She doesn't think she had even spoken to a cat of her own will, not counting her parents.

The Fourtrees grew closer and closer and she grew more and more worried. Would any clan take her in? She knew better, but she couldn't help but hope. That was okay to do, right?

Glowstar stood off to the side as Riverclan ran into the shallow dip that held too many cats to count. Beckoning Splitkit with her white tail, she followed the leader to behind the four oaks, where three other cats sat, watching their progress to where they sat.

"Who is this?" a black tom asked, cocking his head at Glowstar.

"This is Splitkit. Riverclan has come to a decision to offer her to the clans, to trade for land or herbs."

Splitkit's fur prickled with shame. She struggled not to let her tail creep behind her legs and her head duck, but it was too hard to do. The black tom that had spoken a few moments before looked away.

The other two cats, however, stared. From their scents, Splitkit guessed that the ginger tom was from Windclan, and the russet she-cat from Shadowclan, which left the black tom to Thunderclan.

The Windclan tom looked away after a few more moments, but the Shadowclan she-cat kept on looking.

"Glowstar, I think that cat will do best with the two-legs. She

doesn't look like a clan cat. Are you sure one of your cats didn't find her?" that was the black tom. Splitkit couldn't help but duck her head in shame. If Thunderclan, the kindest of all the clans, didn't want her, than she was a lost cause.

Glowstar sighed. "Yes, I know, but I thought Starclan might feel better if we gave her a chance of finding another clan before giving her to the kittypets in the morning. Thank you for your time," her leader said, pulling Splitkit away towards the front of the trees.

"No, wait. Let me talk to the kit in private?" Splitkit's head spun around quicker than a paw could swipe. The Shadowclan leader had asked that? Maybe they were just going to ask her for information so they could ambush Riverclan.

Splitkit was just about bitter enough about the clan to tell, if she was asked.

Chapter 4- They Were Wrong About Me

As much as Splitkit wanted to give up all the information she knew about Riverclan, there were two things wrong with that plan:

One was that she didn't know that much about Riverclan that would help for an ambush, and two was that doing that wouldn't save her from a kittypet life at all.

The other clan leaders left them alone; padding off to who knows where, and Splitkit was alone with the russet she-cat.

"I am Sharpstar. Glowstar said you go by the name of Splitkit?" this she-cat was strange. She wasn't looking away from her. Splitkit was pretty sure this was the first time a cat has looked at her this long before.

"I do now," Splitkit muttered, forgetting that a cat was actually listening to what she would say. Back in Riverclan, she could yowl for all they cared; she was considered a bug or mouse there.

"Now? Did you go by a different name before?" Mouse-dung! She really had to say that...

"Well, um... I was born with the name Rainkit, but Riverclan renamed me after they saw my eyes and face." Splitkit wanted to sink into the ground. What did this leader care?

"I see. Riverclan always have wanted only the best of the perfect cats..." Splitkit was about to defend them, but she realized that Sharpstar was right. Besides, no matter what happens tonight, she wasn't Riverclan anymore.

Really, she never was.

Splitkit didn't say anything to the leader in a response, but she was

itching to ask why the leader wanted to talk to her in private. Sharpstar padded up to Splitkit, sniffing her fur, her ears, her back... studying her, she realized. Did this leader really want Splitkit?

She was able to catch the murmurs that Sharpstar was muttering, but they seemed strange in her mind.

"Weak... underfed... wait... no, that's just a... no muscle whatsoever..." Splitkit wasn't sure what half the words the leader said meant. Underfed? Splitkit thought that was how she was supposed to look. Weak? Sharpstar just didn't know she could lift ten whole minnows in her jaws at once!

"Um, excuse me, but what are you doing?" Splitkit couldn't hold it any longer; she had to know what the leader was thinking!

"I am merely making sure you aren't sick. That would be just like Riverclan, to send a cat with a disease to the other clans."

Splitkit ignored the rude words about Riverclan and thought over what the leader said.

"Wait... are you going to... take me...?" she didn't want to get her hopes up. Maybe this was all a trick, to convince her to go live with the kittypets.

Sharpstar looked at her, a small smile on her face. "Yes, little kit. Shadowclan will take you."

Splitkit's head was floating. Shadowclan, the clan that was supposed to be the most brutal, the meanest, scariest of the clans, was going to take her in?!

"But... Shadowclan... you...!"

Sharpstar purred, "I know, we are the worst, the most evil of the clans... why in Starclan would we take you in, right?"

Splitkit nodded with wide eyes.

"We are not the evil clan that we are made out to be. We follow the

Warrior Code as close as Thunderclan, are as loyal as Windclan, and as true to our word as Riverclan. We just let the rumors fly because they help instill fear in the enemy. Don't you have to admit, that would come in handy if, say, your Riverclan wanted to attack Shadowclan?"

Splitkit could see the logic behind Sharpstar's words. Maybe Shadowclan wasn't so bad after all, because they are taking her in... and that led her to the next question.

"That doesn't have anything to do with you taking me in in the first place, though."

"You are sharp, little kit. I believe in equal chances. My sister, Sweetpetal, is also at what I like to call a disadvantage. Her paws are smaller than normal, and her hindquarters are taller than any other cat's, but she still became one of the best warriors in the clan. I see nothing wrong with a bad outside, it's the inside that counts, in my opinion. And since I'm leader, that is currently all of Shadowclan's point of view."

Splitkit was so happy... this cat had the beliefs that she wished Riverclan had; the belief that her looks meant nothing when it came to personality and skills. She couldn't help a purr that rumbled in her throat, and it went that way for several moments before it was broken off by a yawn. As much as she didn't feel like it, she was still a kit, (if not only for one more day) and she had walked and jumped all the way here.

"I don't suppose any cat helped you on the journey here?" Sharpstar scowled as Splitkit shook her head, eyes fluttering shut.

"Just like Riverclan, to let a kit walk to a Gathering..."

Splitkit felt the need to correct the leader. "I am six moons old tomorrow..." it came out in a yawn, and sounded more like 'iham hix...moons... tahmerrow' but Sharpstar seemed to understand her, nodding and nudged Splitkit in the crook between two roots of the biggest oak.

"Sleep here, I will retrieve you after the Gathering is over."

Splitkit heard Sharpstar pad away, but her senses were quickly fading into sleep, and for once she welcomed it. In the past, she had nightmares almost every night about being teased, or hurt because of her face, but now she had a home. She was a Shadowclan cat! Somehow, it sounded right in her head. Riverclan sounded... wrong. She had come to associate the name with pain and hurt.

Oh well... she could be Shadowclan's next leader, maybe. She would be just like Sharpstar, welcoming cats into the clan regardless on how they looked. Each cat deserved to have a fighting chance.

She would be Splitstar of Shadowclan... now *that* sounded right!

Chapter 5- Will You Keep It?

Splitkit woke in a dark space. It wasn't a bad experience, but she wasn't expecting it, causing her to leap up in surprise. Her eyes were quick to adjust, and when they did, she froze. Around her were four other cats, each in a nest made of moss sleeping soundly. A moment's more of squinting into the dim light led her to the discovery that there were three toms and one other she-cat, each around her age of... six moons! Splitkit was an apprentice today...

...*If* Shadowclan made her an apprentice today. Maybe they will keep her as a kit until she is stronger, because as Sharpstar put it, she was 'weak' and 'underfed'. But, if they were going to do that, why was she in the apprentice den right now? Maybe the Nursery was full, or they didn't want her face to scare the kits.

Splitkit was lost on what she was supposed to do. Should she get up and go outside or lie back down and wait for someone to get her? She was completely rested, a bit sore from her long journey the night before, but she wanted to do something! Maybe all of the cats would be like Sharpstar, and not flinch when they saw her... that would be like Starclan for her!

Splitkit sat back down after one glance to her fur. It was so messy! Having so much free time in Riverclan, she would just groom her pelt the whole day between listening through the reeds, but now her fur was ruffled, sticking every which way and she didn't want to even think about how her back side looked!

With a huff, she began grooming with a swiftness that you could only acquire after having nothing else to do for six moons, finishing with a black and orange pelt that gleamed in the sunlight now shining stronger through the cracks in the bracken.

"GET UP you lazy 'paws! Up, up, UP! The Riverclan cat is up quicker than you four!" Splitkit was pretty sure that her pelt almost fell out from stunned surprise. At the entrance to the den was a grey and cream she-cat. She was very tall, and after a moment's of

recovering, Splitkit was able to recognize the tall hind legs, and guessed that this was Sharpstar's sister, Sweetpetal.

As much as Splitkit wanted to say that she would be good friends with this warrior, she felt the need to correct her.

"I'm not Riverclan," her voice was soft, but it was clearly audible above the apprentice's soft snores, mumbles, and groans. As soon as she spoke, all heads snapped towards her. Sweetpetal looked at Splitkit with an expression that she had never seen in Riverclan.

"If you're not Riverclan, what are you? I don't believe we have made you a Shadowclan cat, yet." Again, four wide-eyed heads bore into her back, awaiting her answer. She couldn't place Sweetpetal's tone; again, it wasn't something she could pinpoint.

A little part in her mind, the part that was still a kit, wanted to back down and apologize, but that was one of the biggest things she learned from the cracks in the reeds: never back down when challenged. Frowning, she tried to settle her beating heart and her quivering tail as she answered.

"I understand that I am not yet Shadowclan, but I was never Riverclan, really. For now, I'm just...me."

Sweetpetal looked at her with that same look before purring. "I like you, Splitpaw."

Splitkit finally named the expression! It took her a few moments just because she saw it so rarely in Riverclan... admiration and respect. But wait...

"Oh, uh... Sweetpetal? I'm not an apprentice. I'm Splitkit, still." The four apprentices looked at her with confusion, still as silent as ever. Sweetpetal looked at her again, and nodded once. "I'll take you to Sharpstar. This is something we will have to discuss."

The grey cream she-cat motioned with her tail to follow her, which Splitkit did with one final look at the apprentices, who were grooming each other and one, a tom, had already gone back to sleep.

Following the warrior out of the den, Splitkit was greeted by stares. Not all, some, but not all cats looked away, instead they studied her. Riverclan had studied her about as much as they would a dead bee. Splitkit's ears burned at all of the attention, both good and bad, and she struggled not to look at her paws. *No!* she thought, those days where she was ashamed of herself were behind her!

Outside, the sun was just above the trees with not a cloud in the sky. The air was warm, the last of green-leaf trying to ward off the chill of leaf-fall as much as it could. Cats were everywhere, grooming, sharing tongues, eating... it was just like Riverclan, except there was no shunning, turned shoulders and heated whispers.

It appeared that the camp was in a type of ditch, with walls rising about three tail-lengths above her strewn with rocks and ferns, and Splitkit wondered if she could even clear it in one jump... not likely. She had never really jumped over anything.

One of the many wonders of watching through the reeds: she never did any exercise, unless retrieving fish and going to the dirt-place counted.

Sweetpetal led Splitkit to a small-looking den surrounded by ferns, which seemed to be as common in the camp as reeds were in Riverclan, and she shivered as she passed through, dew collecting on her perfectly groomed pelt and making it shine for the last moments before it was plunged into dimmer light.

Sharpstar sat with one other cat, a tom with a greenish tortoiseshell pelt and bright green eyes. They seemed in an argument, but Splitkit didn't try to pry as the tom brushed passed the leader on the way out of the den coldly, scowling.

Sharpstar settled her gaze on Splitkit, but she was too busy studying everything. The den was much larger than it looked, with only one nest pushed into the corner. The rest of the space was covered in huge leaves the size of a cat and a strange smelling — and looking — substance. It was black, glittering in the light that the thick-pressed ferns let through, smelling bitter and earthy. The leaves that weren't black were covered in the stuff, forming shaped lines that

gave Splitkit a headache to study too closely.

"Ah, Sweetpetal, I see you have brought me Splitkit; what is the matter?"

Sweetpetal sat down, and after a moment's hesitation, Splitkit copied the she-cat. "Splitkit has yet to be made an apprentice, and I am here to ask when that will happen."

Sharpstar nodded, a not-quite serious expression on her face as she smiled at her sister.

"Did you think I did not already know this? I was going to speak with the kit today to discuss this; do not worry, sister."

Sweetpetal nodded and left with a huff, dipping her head to Splitkit on the way out.

It took all of her will not to pry; Splitkit wanted to make a good impression and be as little of a hindrance and setback as she could, since after all, Shadowclan had taken her in when no one else would.

"Now, Splitkit," The leader snapped Splitkit out of her stream of thought and she looked at her, "Since you were renamed because of Riverclan's foolishness, I will give you back your name that you had befo—"

"That's okay, Sharpstar. If I can, I would like to keep it as Split."

"But why? You could be Rainkit... Rainpaw again,"

"The reason is still something I'm discovering for myself, but if I can I would like to keep the name I have now."

Sharpstar looked at her for a moment. "You are very wise, for a kit."

"Thank you."

Sure Rainstar sounded good for Riverclan, but Splitstar sounds better for me.

Chapter 6- The Shadow of RiverClan

Splitkit had just left the leader's den when Sharpstar called the clan meeting, and almost instantly every cat was gathered in the clearing. It was obvious that the meeting was about her, but she didn't know where to go. Was she supposed to go with Sharpstar up to the top of the rock slope, or just wait and sit down?

Her question was answered as she heard her name get called by one of the apprentices.

"Hey, Splitkit, come on! You're so slow!"

She scampered over to where they were all gathered, three toms and one other she-cat. The three toms, one pale grey, one ginger, and one white with black paws, were all looking at her, wary and looking like they weren't sure what to say to her now that she was right there in front of them.

"Why's your face like that?" the ginger tom asked bluntly after a moment's more of uneasy tension. Splitkit stiffened at the question about her face, looking down and struggling to come up with a good answer.

"Bravepaw! Don't be a mouse-brain! She probably doesn't know why, and you don't need to know! It's rude!" that was the pale grey tom. His amber eyes scorned at the ginger tom, shooting an apologetic glance at Splitkit.

"I'm sorry about my mouse-brained brother... I'm Moonpaw by the way. Oh and he's Bonepaw," he introduced, motioning to the black pawed tom.

"Do I not get an introduction too, Moonpaw?" that was the blue grey she-cat with a white muzzle, who had been watching them all with a distant gaze.

"Oh, sorry, Driftpaw. Well... she's Driftpaw, the apprentice that is so bossy that no one can stand her," Moonpaw didn't sound like he was being mean, more like just stating a fact.

"Will you 'paws be quiet? Sharpstar is speaking!" a warrior hissed from a few tail-lengths away, shooting a glare especially at Splitkit, like it was her fault.

"...and from this moment onward, she shall be Shadowclan. Now, since she is still technically a kit, I give her her apprentice name, Splitpaw, and... Coalfoot will be her mentor. Thank you."

Splitkit was really disappointed. Was that it? No touching noses, no cats calling her apprentice name to the skies? She didn't even know who Coalfoot was!

"Woah, you got Coalfoot? She's, like, the most laid-back warrior ever! Lucky! I have Smokefur-"

"Who is right behind you, and thinks that instead of battle practice you should search the elders for ticks." Finished a calico tom, with a white pelt and black splashes and smaller orange dots.

Moonpaw closed his eyes in a silent curse as he heard his mentor, who was behind him sporting a smirk on his completely white face.

"You better get to it, Moonpaw; you know how those elders catch those ticks like we catch prey!"

"We do, huh?" came another voice from behind Smokefur, a skinny tom with grey fur that seemed to be falling off in patches, leaving pink skin underneath in clear view.

"Barkfall! You... you heard that, huh?"

"Yes, I did, and I think I would like you personally to clear me of ticks. Moonpaw can cover Briarscrach."

The young calico tom ducked his head. "Yes, Barkfall." Moonpaw snickered to the rest of them behind Smokefur's back, where they had been watching with grins and smirks of their own.

"Splitpaw, there you are! Come, we will begin your training right now." From behind her came a small grey black she-cat, smaller than the rest of the cats around her, but still larger than her. Almost every cat was larger than Splitpaw, it seemed.

"Yes Coalfoot," she answered, following the she-cat to the steep slope lines with rocks and fine white sand, taking a huge leap and landing at the top, about three tail-lengths higher.

Splitpaw hesitated. Could she make it up at all? Forget one jump... she hadn't ever jumped up to anything before. Another thing to thank Riverclan for...

Taking a deep breath, she jumped about a tail-length upwards, scrabbling in the white sand for a place to jump off of again, and she did, sending up a spray of sand as she did. She landed just short of the top, and she clawed the rest of her way up, panting heavily.

"Don't worry, it gets easier," Coalfoot said, already being swallowed up by the ferns as Splitpaw struggled to keep up. She had to leap over several things that her mentor simply stepped over, and had to run just to keep up with the small warrior's trot.

Finally Coalfoot stopped at a sandy clearing, turning to see Splitpaw, who was panting on the ground, her chest heaving. She had never moved that much before, plus she was still not entirely recovered from last night's journey to the Gathering.

Her mentor looked at her heaped form and frowned.

"Did you not ever play as a kit?"

Splitpaw shook her head, knowing that spying from the cracks didn't count.

"Well, that explains a lot. Kits play because they're kits, sure, but we encourage it because they are moving and developing their muscles. Since you had none of that experience..."

Splitpaw frowned. Would the shadow of Riverclan's damage ever stop casting over her?

Chapter 7- Be a Kit to Grow Up

Splitpaw was angry. Riverclan's shadow wouldn't leave her! It was bad enough that she had almost no experience dealing with other cats, how to hold a conversation, and how to do simple things like jump, but Coalfoot telling her how she was too weak to do the simplest of things, because of the stupid fish eating clan that had given her up... it made her hate them. Would she ever have a normal life?

"Since you have had no kit-hood, we'll make you one," Coalfoot finished, and Splitpaw looked at her with confusion. How in Starclan do you make a kit-hood?!

"...How will we do that?"

"I'll explain in a moment; let me grab the other apprentices from their mentors. This will be a good chance for every cat." her light grey mentor left after saying those words, the ferns, still damp with morning dew, dripping in the silence that followed her exit from the sandy area.

What was she supposed to do, now? She was finally breathing regularly, but her paws still hurt. She had never moved so much! At least with the journey to the Gathering, she was walking in a straight line...

Remembering the ache she woke to this morning, Splitpaw just decided to stretch. She focused on her fore legs, feeling her shoulder pop and her claws coming out of their sheathes, glinting in the sun, which was peeking out from behind fluffy white clouds. She had moved around the rest of her small body when she heard voices racing towards her.

"...Nuh uh! I will totally beat you there!" she was pretty sure that was Moonpaw or... thinking back on it, she had never heard Bonepaw speak.

"You guys! Get back here right now!" Splitkit smiled as she heard Driftpaw's bossy tone keeping the toms in check.

Coalfoot appeared back in the clearing, followed by Bonepaw, Moonpaw, Bravepaw, and Driftpaw. The toms were huffing, Moonpaw looking disgruntled on how Bonepaw had beaten him.

"It was close, though! It's not like you left me in the dust, so don't go bragging!" Moonpaw licked one of his grey paws and looked over to Splitpaw.

"Hey, Splitpaw! Coalfoot told us we were going to play moss ball!"

"What's moss ball?" she asked, cocking her head.

All three 'paws started to laugh, but when Splitpaw only looked more lost, they straightened up and looked like her like she was a... she didn't even have a word for it.

"You're serious?! You're telling us that you never played moss ball before?!" Driftpaw looked like she didn't believe it as Splitpaw shook her head once more.

Coalfoot, who had disappeared into the ferns once again, came back with a mouthful of moss, separating them into balls, one for each of them.

As soon as her mentor passed them to the toms, they started batting them in the air and purring, grins on their faces.

"It's been such a long time since I've done this!"

"It's been half a moon, mouse-brain. And besides, I saw you playing with that leaf after you finished with the elders!" so that was Bonepaw's voice. It was... nice. It was like honey, which although she had never tasted, she had smelled and it had made her mouth water. The white tom's black paws were a blur as he batted the moss between them.

Splitpaw felt a ball roll onto her paws. She looked down, and then at Coalfoot, who was watching her. Her pelt prickling as the other apprentices stopped to watch her, she hooked a claw around a

trendily and flung it into the air. When it came back down, she had a flash memory and she imagined the ball was Glowstar or just Riverclan in general, and swatted it with so much force it flew over Coalfoot's head and disappeared into the undergrowth.

"Splitpaw, you're supposed to keep the ball in your swipes, not bat it away," Driftpaw lectured turning and searching in the undergrowth for her moss. Splitpaw's pelt burned. It wasn't her fault! She had never done this before, and she had been too consumed in her anger at Riverclan for her to focus on keeping the moss.

Ducking her head down, she didn't notice Bonepaw in front of her until he spoke. "You don't put all of your force into the swipe, just enough to keep it in the air. I could see you were thinking about something that made you angry; just focus on moving and getting stronger."

Her head darted up; they were almost nose-to-nose. Leaping back, Splitpaw noticed he hadn't moved.

"S-sorry," she mewed, barely catching Bravepaw's moss ball when he flung it at her.

"Use mine," he offered, giving Bonepaw a glare full of... another thing she didn't know the name of. Starclan, if this continued, she would have to start asking them, 'what are you feeling?' all the time!

Under the toms' watchful gazes, she managed to keep it from flying off into the unknown and keeping it close to her. Coalfoot watched from a few tail-lengths away, smiling and sunning herself under the heat that flowed from the sun which was on the other side of the sky now, and was turning orange. Driftpaw was always sure to point it out if they were moving wrong or were being too fast or slow, Bravepaw would make her laugh, and Bonepaw would murmur encouragements in her ear and help her when she dropped the ball.

Moonpaw was quiet for most of the time, instead joining in with Bravepaw in his weird looks that were sent in Bonepaw's direction.

Splitpaw had never seen such an expression before, but she wasn't too bothered by it; her rumbling stomach was more of an issue at that moment.

Coalfoot had disappeared yet again, this time returning later on with six squirrels, which took another cat, a tom, which dropped them off and padded away after a smile at the apprentices, excluding Splitpaw from the warmth of his gaze and instead shooting her a wary stare.

She stared at her squirrel as the other five cats attacked theirs, biting into the fur and tearing off pieces of meat, dripping with blood. Did they really eat like that? Fish were so clean... they were lush to bite into, no fur or blood involved, but she was too hungry, having skipped her morning meal.

She bent her head down and took a bite, wincing inside as the fur brushed against her tongue. When she bit down, her mouth was filled with blood and flavor. It wasn't a bad taste, she thought as she licked her lips and bit down again.

Maybe she could get used to squirrels.

Chapter 8- The Sun Makes Me Confused

The rest of the night was spent with her new friends. Driftpaw, as bossy as she was, made Splitpaw laugh, and at the end of the day, that's all that mattered to her; she didn't care if she was with the most annoying she-cat in Shadowclan, Driftpaw didn't flinch, she didn't judge, and she didn't mention how Splitpaw looked.

Bonepaw, Moonpaw, and Bravepaw were all typical toms. They joked about her, and although it stung, how they called her 'Splitface' as a joke, she still smiled through it. Bonepaw, in fact, didn't speak much at all, always standing beside her and looking at her with a strange face.

She still couldn't put a name on the expression.

She went to sleep that night warm. She was surrounded by fluffy bodies, all pressing against her in the cool night. Leaf-bare was almost upon them, and she could smell something in the air... something sharp and exciting. It made her lungs swell, and at the same time it made them sting from the whole thing. The smell made her look forward to leaf bare, as long as she had her friends to stick by her.

Her dreams were muddled, like trying to look at the sun through the puffy clouds which made the sky dark and cold.

Like looking at her face that first time, oh so long ago.

She was in the Riverclan Nursery again. The sky was black and full of stars, but the sun was shining, sending no warmth but still making Splitpaw's eyes hurt when she glanced at it. The clearing was full of noise, but there was no source, from what her eyes told her. The place was empty. She looked up at the sun again, and it had a face. It was wearing an expression just like Bonepaw had that night. Strange.

She wondered if the sun always looked like that, or if was just another stupid dream. She steps forward again and her paw lands in a puddle. She looks down, and is unable to see herself. The puddle shows a starry sky, an expression-wearing sun... and nothing else.

Another thing is that her paw is missing.

She looks down at it, worried but not quite concerned. So what if she couldn't see her paw? It's not like... oh okay, now her whole foreleg was in the water, and she had to awkwardly crouch to be comfortable. The puddle doesn't ripple, even when she blows on it. Frowning, she licks it, and is greeted with the taste of blood. Ew! Since when did puddles taste like that?!

She didn't have a cut in her mouth; it was definitely coming from the puddle. Her chest is now sinking into the water, and the sun is now smirking at her. Splitpaw suddenly had the feeling that whatever would happen to her once her head went under would not be good. She struggled to get free, only making it worse. Her chin is flooded with the bile taste as she whips her head back and forth, only realizing too late that that made her completely sink under.

She can't breathe. Her head hurts. She thrashes around, and all she can clearly see is that expression, oh, that expression that she didn't know the name to. Oh, how she was starting to hate that expression.

"Splitpaw...."

"Splitpaw!"

"Splitpaw wake up! You're thrashing more than a fish does out of water!"

"...Sorry, Bravepaw."

"It's okay, you mouse-brain, just stop!"

"Okay..."

...

"...Hey, Bravepaw?"

"What, Splitpaw!"

"Does the sun have a face?"

Chapter 9- Half Of A Knot I Am

Coalfoot, much to Splitpaw's dismay, said that Shadowclan worked in pairs for almost everything. It made sense, but from Shadowclan...? They were supposed to be the cats that worked alone, that were practically loners and scorned any sort of cooperation!

But, looking back, Shadowclan has cleared up a lot of the myths and lies about themselves.

"Now," her mentor addressed the four other apprentices next to Splitpaw, all bleary-eyed and ruffled from sleep, "Partnership is, of course, a trait exclusively for Shadowclan, just as the Hunter's Crouch is for Thunderclan, or the speed of chasing prey is for Windclan. You do not get your permanent Partner until you become a warrior, of course, and up until then you will each work with each other.

"Partnership has nothing to do with age, and a new warrior can be paired with a senior one. Since there are an odd number of apprentices for these four seasons, four out of you five 'paws expect your Partner to be one of the cats sitting next to you."

All of them looked at themselves, and then at each other, trying to predict who will be paired with who.

Splitpaw looked at her options: Bravepaw, the ginger tom that had a knack for saying exactly what was on his mind, Driftpaw, who was kind to her but sometimes could be annoying by the most patient of cats, and Moonpaw, the silver tom who was very handsome, but was slightly full of himself.

Bonepaw. He almost never spoke with her around, which was strange considering she could hear him loud and clear with Driftpaw and the others when she was still in the den grooming.

Splitpaw hadn't really spoken to any other cats in the clan, so she

did not know how many unpartnered warriors there were.

Breaking her out of her pondering was Bravepaw, with yet another question.

"What decides who your Partner will be?"

Okay, that wasn't as silly as some of the questions he has asked, like 'why are beetles so small?' and 'why does it take so long to grow big?'

"Your final assessment before you become a warrior will have you work with each cat that does not have a partner, both in fighting and hunting, and the senior warriors and the leader will decide."

That was... comforting, in a certain sense. At least if Splitpaw made a mistake the first time, she would have multiple other chances to fix or perfect it.

For the rest of the day they practiced basic battle skills, both alone and with another cat. Although they learned nothing more complex than a simple paw swipe, whether it was not stumbling over their own paws, over their Partner's paws, or simply holding their balance, they all had trouble. Splitpaw, her body having never moved this much in less than five sunrises was the worst off, wincing at her sore muscles and panting from lack of breath doing the smallest things.

"Coalfoot, I don't want to work with Splitpaw! She's too slow and she keeps messing up!" Bravepaw was starting to really get on her nerves with his constant talking, and Driftpaw, who was almost as bad, then got right into Bravepaw's face.

"You have no place to complain! Aren't you the one who tripped over his own tail earlier!? Do what you're told and leave Splitpaw alone, it's not her fault she's weak!"

Splitpaw's mentor just sat with her tail over her paws neatly and watched with no expression on her face.

"Well you keep bumping into me when we go back-to-back! I can't move!"

"Hey, guys, calm down! There's no need to fight!" Moonpaw tried to get in between the two apprentices, who were head to head, noses touching and eyes slanted with anger.

"Oh shut it, you clumsy tom! You're worse than Bravepaw!"

Splitpaw sighed as all three of them were arguing with each other, with her and Bonepaw watching from a few tail-lengths away.

"Do you want to practice while they are being squirrel-brains?"

Splitpaw almost jumped as she heard the white tom's mew, surprised that he was talking to her at all. He wanted to practice?

"S-sure..." she stuttered, wincing as her voice rose into a squeak. She pulled herself up off of her haunches and padded over to where he was waiting for her, for once not wearing that Starclan-cursed expression. She rose onto her hind legs and pressed her small back against his big, warm one. She wobbled, not used to standing on only two legs for so long, and she could feel Bonepaw trying not to do the same.

"So," she said, proud that she didn't stutter. After all, she had never touched another cat so much before, "What do we do now?"

"Oh, um... I guess we can practice the paw swipe?"

"Do we have to be in this position, or can we do it on all fours? I'm pretty 'weak,' as the others put it."

"Uh, yeah. Here..." for some reason, the black pawed tom twisted in such a way that they both collapsed with matching 'oofs.'

Blinking dust out of her eyes, she tried to move but found her body trapped under Bonepaw's. She twisted her head to get her nose out of the dirt, and... found herself nose-to-nose with him, his blue eyes meeting her mismatched ones. She just sort of... stared for a moment before realizing that she was free and she jumped up and looked away, blowing the long fur from the top of her head out of her eyes.

"I think I know who Splitpaw will want to be her Partner,"

whispered Bravepaw to his silver counterpart, Moonpaw, unheard by the two cats that were eye-locked.

Chapter 10- The Taste Of Mint

Three sunrises later, all of the apprentices were sick of each other. They had all taken turns doing simple moves with a partner, and they had all stepped on tails, paws, ears, and once Bravepaw even sat on Bonepaw accidently.

"Why must we do everything in pairs? It is really getting to be too much!"

"Now Bravepaw, you aren't doing *everything* together," Coalfoot - who seemed to take care of all the apprentices, since Splitpaw didn't even know who the other apprentice's mentors were - scorned.

"Yes we are! You had Driftpaw trail me into the Dirtplace yesterday!"

"If Driftpaw hadn't been so busy bossing Bonepaw around, she would've heard me say how you didn't have to follow your Partner into dens and the Dirtplace."

Driftpaw flinched. "Well it wasn't very fun for me either, I'll have you know..."

"Yes, yes, enough of that. Now, Sharpstar said that you will be going to the Moonstone tonight, as the usual trip that apprentices take to speak to Starclan."

"Awesome! Who will be taking us? Sharpstar herself?" Moonpaw was bouncing with excitement, and he looked about ready to scamper out and begin the journey right now, which, considering the position of the just-beginning-to-set sun would be just what they would do.

"No cat is taking you. Another tradition that only Shadowclan does, since there are no other territories besides kittypet places, is send the apprentices alone. It gathers trust and experience, and you are partnered with the cat that you work the worst with."

Great Starclan, help her. She would be paired with Moonpaw?! They were worse than any other paring, not in personality but in just pure size. Moonpaw was by far the largest of the apprentices, and of course Splitpaw was the smallest. It instantly turned into a situation to where her head was resting just above his lower back when they were back to back on their hind legs.

"Will there be any fighting?" Bonepaw sounded nervous, and it made her smile inside to hear his voice sound so unsure and silly, but she was sure if she were to speak her voice would wobble just as much she would fall over!

"Possibly, if your luck is bad enough to where you run across a defiant kittypet, but those chances are low. Now, go stand next to your partner and go to the Medicine Cat den, where Mintbreeze will supply you with the needed herbs. Return to me when you have done that."

Splitpaw sighed and met with Moonpaw, walking in step with him, although his walk was a steady trot for her. The clearing was full of cats, and on closer inspection what she had thought before was just friendship and affection, turned out to be partnership: two toms taking turns eating from a frog, (which she had yet to try), and while the other was eating they would watch and scan the area, a tom and a she-cat grooming each other and scanning for ticks.

Moonpaw looked unsure but determined; his paw steps showing how he was ready, but the shake in them before they landed were louder than his calls to the warriors.

The Medicine Cat den was in the shade of a willow tree; long, fuzzy tendrils snaked around each leaf of a fern to create a solid wall which Splitpaw was sure to be resistant to rain and the harsh winds that were beginning to barrage the clearing. Pushing past the wall of foliage, Splitpaw was greeted with the smell of medicine the most obvious smell being mint.

"Why in Starclan does it smell so much like mint in here?" Bravepaw muttered, earning a glare from the tom that was known as Mintbreeze.

"It keeps the herbs from tasting too bad, and it is good for your breath."

Moonpaw and Splitpaw were the last to arrive, so they watched as the greenish tortoiseshell tom passed the other group (Driftpaw was working with a newly made warrior) small piles of leaves, including both foul and sweet smelling mushes and a couple of small, sharp smelling mint leaves of whom he was named after.

"Thank you, Mintbreeze. The mint really does work," Bonepaw nodded his head in thanks unlike Bravepaw, who scowled, and the two turned to leave.

Walking fully into the den to receive their share of traveling herbs, Splitpaw studied the silver tom beside her with a mild interest. At least they weren't at odds as far as personalities went, as Moonpaw was more of the follower than the leader, always trying to keep fights from breaking out. Splitpaw was just slightly different:

She will never follow.

The pile of leaves before her paws was small, with about five different types of herbs that she couldn't name, not counting the mint. She lapped them up, wincing at the taste they left even with the mint to clear it out.

"Thank you, Mintbreeze," they chorused, and padded out into the clearing once more, taking deep breaths and giggling inside on how the mint made their mouths so sensitive.

Meeting back with Bravepaw, Bonepaw, Driftpaw, and a golden brown she-cat warrior who Driftpaw would be partnered with, Coalfoot nodded and went to speak to the warrior and the bossy she-cat.

Splitpaw's mentor then moved to Bravepaw and Bonepaw as Driftpaw and her Partner padded out of the camp and towards the mountain that could just barely be seen above the tree tops.

Although she spoke too quietly to hear, Splitpaw guessed that they were all taking different routes or directions, and she was right; as

the ginger and white toms left the camp, Coalfoot came over and pointed to the direction that they would be taking to the mountain with her tail.

"There will be two kittypet places, a Thunderpath, and a place that Twolegs have flimsy green dens. Since this is the longest path, I expect you two to be back in about three sunrises. Hunting is easy up until you hit the mountain, but I think getting to the Moonstone will not take that much time. Remember that this is a partnered activity and there will be a warrior watching you until you arrive at the kittypet place. There is a possibility of rats, but do not attack them. Anything else?"

Both apprentices shook their heads, but Splitpaw was panicking. Sure she knew how to hunt, one of the only things that she was really good at, but the Thunderpath? There was a certain way to get across, right? Shadowclan and Coalfoot had taught them nothing of the sort.

"Ready, Splitpaw?" she heard the quake in Moonpaw's voice, but the way his fur brushed against her flank comforted her. The herbs made her forget the hunger that had been beginning to gnaw at her stomach, and she had a feeling that it would all be okay with the silver peacemaker with her.

"Only if you are; race you to that tree?"

Chapter 11- Hmmph! Toms are Mouse-Brains!

The day was getting progressively worse as Moonpaw and herself reached the edge of Shadowclan's territory, as if their emotions were affecting the weather so. Huge, angry-looking grey clouds were blocking out the sun and racing towards them, bring with them a cold and hungry wind that burrowed into the two apprentice's short fur and sending chills and the smell of upcoming rain.

Splitpaw was ashamed to say she was already tired, her paws were sore and she was huffing but she was being quiet about it as Moonpaw lead and held branches for her so she didn't have to jump. It was irritating her that he thought she wasn't able to care for herself, and she was just fine, but it made her smile on the inside that he was thinking about her enough to do it at all.

As the silver grey tom opened his mouth to speak, another strong blow of wind brought the sense of lightning, something that Splitpaw had only experienced once, and she really, really didn't want to think about it.

"We should find shelter for tonight. I doubt that this will be just a light storm," Moonpaw said, and although he had stated the obvious, he looked back for her opinion.

"Good idea; let's start looking, preferably somewhere where we won't get wet," is all she said, hating the feeling of water on her pelt and in her eyes. With that, they stopped trying to go forward and although it would've been smarter, one of Coalfoot's instructions for all Partners is to never split up; the farthest away they both felt comfortable with was about ten tail lengths.

The smells of sharp rain and lightning were getting too close for Splitpaw, and she was starting to shake.

"H-Have you found anything yet, Moonpaw?" she called, hating the stutter in her voice and wishing she wasn't so afraid of the upcoming storm.

"I think, but we may be pretty cramped," he called, and she rushed over on sore paws to where he was pointing with his tail towards.

Cramped was right; the few boulders that leaned against a fallen tree were barely enough for one warrior, and she doubted it would fit both of them.

"Is there any way we can make it bigger?"

Moonpaw looked around and went in search of things that would make staying there a little less uncomfortable while Splitpaw tried to look for any prey that was in the area. Any prey smart enough to realize the weather that was coming would be in their dens, safe, where Splitpaw wished she was. Trying to ignore the smell of lightning and rain, she focused on the scent of a squirrel. She breathed as deep as her chest would let her, focusing fully on the little brown ball of fur about five tail lengths away. *Perfect!* She crouched down, her back legs feeling awkward as they were squished down but ignoring the stiffness as she crawled forward, the leaves and debris of the forest floor brushing against her chin.

The squirrel stopped chewing on an acorn and looked straight at Splitpaw. *Mouse-dung!* Taking a deep breath, she was about to jump on it and hope for the best when a silver blur flew behind the prey and made it shoot straight toward her outstretched claws. Killing the squirrel with a somewhat clumsy bite to the neck, she looked up to see her Partner looking at her.

"That's why we hunt in pairs," he muttered, somewhat upset for a reason Splitpaw didn't understand. He gestured for her to take the squirrel and follow him, which she did without complaining about his bad mood, which was beginning to turn the air sour.

They reached the shelter just at the first raindrop pushed past the tightly packed pine trees and landed on her nose. Moonpaw had leaned a couple of broken branches against the already fallen tree and boulders, creating enough space for them to lie down on the

hurried nests he had made.

"Thank you for the extra shade and the nest," she called as he went to survey the clouds outside, his eyes tired and wary.

"Thank you for the prey," his voice was flat and emotionless, and Splitpaw wondered why in Starclan he would bad mad. Did she say something? Do something, maybe?

The moody silver tom joined her and took a bite from the untouched squirrel, waiting for her to take the next bite, which she turned down.

"I'm not hungry," she lied, frowning as her stomach made protests to her mouth. She was actually starving, but maybe giving Moonpaw the squirrel would make him feel better; the last thing she wanted to do was sleep in the shelter next to a cat with the attitude of a fox.

"If you say so," he muttered, looking at her a moment longer before taking another bite, chewing and releasing smells so good her mouth almost flooded with craving.

The rain outside was beginning to pick up outside, and Splitpaw was trying to focus on the rain, the thin nests, anything to keep her from thinking about the squirrel less than a tail length being devoured by Moonpaw, her temporary Partner.

As if Starclan was intent on making her more uncomfortable in the situation she was in, her stomach made the loudest sound she didn't even know it could.

Moonpaw, mouth halfway for another bite of the quickly shrinking prey, froze and looked at her with an unreadable expression. Splitpaw decided the best approach was just to pretend that it didn't happen, and she continued to look out into the now outright downpour.

For several moments she felt no movement next to her before the air became unbreathable, and she felt the half-eaten squirrel land at her paws.

"You mouse-brain, starving yourself won't get us to the Moonstone any quicker."

"It wasn't about getting to the Moonstone; it was about your foul mood! I didn't want to eat with it hanging on me like Greencough." She hated how cold her voice sounded, so she decided to look at him to get him to understand without making it worse, which was exactly what was happening.

"My 'foul mood' was because you went hunting without me! That is one of the first rules of having a Partner is hunting together, Splitpaw!"

"I'm sorry, I've grown up alone and that's how I'm going to want it for a while. You'd understand, if you went through what I did!"

Splitpaw hated how she was making it worse, but she couldn't stand it when cats accused her of something that wasn't her fault.

"Oh, get over it! You look like a freak to some cats, well get over it! You're in Shadowclan now, or are you still Riverclan? That's it; you're still one of the fish-eaters!"

What?

Splitpaw got right up in Moonpaw's cocky face.

"I *was* and will *never* be one of them again," she spat with such force that he craned his neck to get away from her. What had she done?! She ran out of the den and into the rain, her inner disgust drowning out the horrible feeling of water on her fur.

She heard the tom calling her name, but she was too busy sobbing and running, running away. She swept the fur away from her eyes, now drenched and hanging in her face, and ran on.

Then the lightning started.

Chapter 12- Old Memories

Splitpaw was running.

The rain plastered her fur together, making her heavier and her already sore paws yowl in pain. Her claws were full of mud and other things she didn't want to think about, and the tears falling from her eyes were adding to the wet fur already hanging limply in her face.

She didn't feel any of it.

It was very silly of her, running, but she couldn't help it. It wasn't Moonpaw's accusation that she was Riverclan, it was just all of the memories from her treatment rushing back at her from the mental rocks she buried it under. She saw how a little kit that had been born a moon before her be treated by the other warriors; she was so stunned. Splitpaw hadn't known what to expect, since what she knew was all that she knew. To see this little kit be treated so kindly... she was so guilty to feel such jealously towards that little kit.

Okay, she was really tired now. The anger was seeping away and leaving her tired, still hungry, and having a long way back to walk on her sore and throbbing paws.

Splitpaw sighed and began to follow her scent trail back when a bright flash across the sky made her legs buckle, and her eyes squeezed closed.

She whimpered as another flash lit up the reeds around her. Rain dripped through the roof to the den every few heart beats and kept her from trying to disappear. Her small body, still weak from the sudden change from milk to fish, throbbed all over and her head pulsed. The reed nest she was laying in was far from comfortable; Splitkit had never liked reeds in her nest, instead preferring the moss she had found outside the Nursery where no cat went, but then it all disappeared one day and she had to lie back down on the reeds.

Yet another flash filled her vision and yanked her cruelly out of her thoughts and back to the present as small sobs racked her body. The air was sour smelling from the flashes, and she was alone. Skyheart and Strongsoul were both back in the Warriors den, leaving Splitkit alone to face the scary things that came in the night, like the bad dreams and the cramps that overcame her small frame when she fell asleep wrong.

"Splitkit? Are you in there?" the blissful sound of her mother's mew filled her ears, and she turned around to see no one. Had she imagined it? Hesitantly, she peeked her head out of the den, letting her eyes adjust to the almost complete blackness outside.

Another flash, louder than the others, made her flinch and her paws shiver. She whimpered.

"Whoa, you're right. She is afraid. What a silly cat. Obviously her face isn't the only think wrong with her!" that was her father. Splitkit felt so stupid.

"Probably; come on, let's get back to the den, it's starting to rain again."

'No! Wait! Take me with you!' Splitkit's mind yelled out to her leaving parents, unable to voice herself because of the fear locking her body in place. She couldn't move her mouth. Her paws, eyes and chest the only things moving. Her heart beat so fast she couldn't keep up with it.

Her body was locked in place.

Splitpaw's body is again stuck, frozen in fear. She is too afraid to even think. Her chest is heaving; her eyes are wide in a fear-frozen face. Her whole body seemed to flinch as another flash struck the sky with the sound of a thousand boulders falling.

"...Splitpaw? Is that you...?" Moonpaw's worry-filled mew falls upon unhearing ears. Splitpaw is stuck in her head, reliving that horrible, Starclan-cursed night as a kit, over and over. Moonpaw, who's fur is also plastered to his surprisingly smaller frame, rushes over and checks if she is hurt.

My body has no injuries, she thought, *it's my mind that's hurt.*

"Splitpaw, you have to follow me! We aren't safe out here..." his

voice drifts in and out, and Splitpaw can only struggle to move her body that seems to be like rock. Another bolt, this time almost directly overhead, sends her running. Her body, from being pushed forward for so long, shot forwards like a squirrel escaping towards a tree. Her muscles yowl, her paws groan and whine, her whole body protests, but she doesn't stop until she is under that fallen tree and curled up in the tightest ball with silent fear-filled tears falling. She was scared to death. The lightning was too loud, too bright, too... real.

Moonpaw is a few heartbeats behind her, and makes an unintelligible noise as he sees her already in her quivering ball. He settles down and begins licking her, getting the water out of her fur, which was starting to make her shiver even more.

At first she stiffens, his tongue uncomfortable, and he pauses. She relaxes after a moment, too cold but too afraid to uncurl, and lets the silver tom lick her fur dry.

"I'm guessing that this has to do with your Riverclan kithood. Look... I'm sorry for calling you a Riverclan cat, I was just hurt that you didn't ask for help with the hunting. I didn't know you would... react the way you did. If there is anything that I can do to help you right now...?"

Splitpaw, finally at peace about her argument with her Partner, simply shakes her head, her smile unseen, and falls asleep after the next flash, too tired to be scared.

Chapter 13- Moonpaw is Picky

Splitpaw woke to cold wind and shivers. Her skin felt like she had rolled in a puddle; after she was fully awake and remembered what happened last night, she remembered why. Moonpaw, angry about her hunting without him when partnership told them to do just that, accused her of still being Riverclan; all of the memories of her abuse and mistreatment has risen to the surface from where she had buried it, and she had ran away in a flurry of spitting anger and sobs, only to be caught, lost, in the middle of a lightning storm. She had always hated lightning.

The said mouse-brained tom was sleeping beside her, his eyes closed and forehead furrowed. He was curled up in a ball, tail twitching gently just above his nose. His fur was groomed and shining, and Splitpaw was horrified at the state of hers. Apparently Moonpaw had only groomed her until she fell asleep. It was ruffled, patches showing how it was still damp from last night's rain.

Taking a step outside from their tiny little den, Splitpaw surveyed her surroundings, taking a deep breath as life started to stir again from the flooding of water that the forest seemed to have received. Puddles reflected a dreary grey sky, usually fluffy clouds grey and heavy-looking. The very air seemed to be filled with water, the chill turning it painful as it went down her throat. Fog blurred the trees a few tail-lengths away, even though the sun was probably shining brightly overhead.

Noticing that if they wanted to get to the Moonstone by the full moon tonight they would have to get moving soon, Splitpaw turned back around from her still position and went to wake up the grey mass of fur who was Moonpaw.

Splitpaw had very briefly considered getting revenge for what he had said to her last night, but she remembered how he had admitted how he was wrong and he was sorry; she had to give him some credit... she didn't know any other tom that would've done that.

"Wake up, Moonpaw; if you want any food, you have to go hunting with me."

"Unngh..." he moaned, rolling over and heaving himself up onto wobbly paws.

"Whatter weh huntenh...?" he mumbled. Splitpaw held back a smirk.

"Anything we can. I'm not picky."

"But I am," he protested. Splitpaw gave him a look.

"What! I am!"

"You get what you get."

"Yes, and what I will get is what I want. And today I want squirrel."

"Yes, Moonstar, right away. And what are you going to do if we catch a mouse instead?"

"Then we go and catch a squirrel," he huffed as she gave him another look and paused to take in all of the prey scents, his eyes glistening as he picked up a scent that she couldn't recognize.

"Actually, I'm more in the mood for rabbit, and there's one straight ahead! Here; you go around that tree... there, and make some noise. It should come straight towards me because the marsh is to the other side, and to the other is where you will be. It's easy!"

Splitpaw nodded, not even knowing what a rabbit looked like, and padded over to where Moonpaw had directed her to go on silent paws. Upon reaching her position, she caught her Partner's nod, and she kicked a pebble that was right next to her. A small white body suddenly shot forward, straight towards the silver tom lying in wait, and was caught with the barest edge of his claws.

"Woo hoo! That was so close! Come on, Splitpaw, take a bite of rabbit! It's delicious!"

Bounding over, Moonpaw's happiness and smiles were infectious.

She smiled as he let her take the first bite. She found it similar to squirrel, but it tasted... wild. Splitpaw grinned widely, knowing she probably looked crazy with the blood dripping from her chin.

After they were done with the rabbit, they buried the remains that they both couldn't finish and started walking towards the huge mountain. They had only been walking long enough for their stomachs to no longer feel stretched to the limit when they were greeted with a sour smell of an unknown place and cats.

"Is that the Twoleg place...?"

"If it is, the warrior that has been watching over us is gone now,"

"So be it. Let's go, my paws are getting sore."

Chapter 14- Sharper Claws

The Twoleg place was quiet, but at the same time, Splitpaw couldn't hear her own thoughts. She didn't know the bad things and the kit tales that Moonpaw seemed to know, but the way he was on edge was getting to her. The place was full of huge den things, but instead of bracken and ferns, they were made of colorful materials that she didn't know the names of. There were little trees, without branches, bark, or leaves, stacked up next to each other in a straight line, and they looked oddly shaped.

"What in Starclan are those things?!"

For a moment Splitpaw thought the silver tom was speaking about the weird tree sticks, but he was gesturing to the small balls that were on the ground a couple of tail lengths away with his tail. Splitpaw didn't know what they were, either. There were four, that she could count, and each were different colors; One pink, the other blue, and two orange. They had little spikes on them and smelled like cat, and that was the thought that kept her from jumping like Moonpaw when a small tom leapt out in front of them.

"Hiya! I don't recognize you... are you new here? Where are your housefolk living at?"

Moonpaw and she shared wary glances. So this was a kittypet? He didn't look like much; he was a small white tom with black splotches on his back and face, with amber eyes and a little bit too much fat. He didn't look on edge at all, unlike them, who were heartbeats away from unsheathing their claws and bolting out of there.

Splitpaw sighed as Moonpaw made no sign of answering the kittypet.

"We do not have Two- housefolk. We are from the forest. Could you please point us in the right direction to leave this place?"

The tom blinked. "Yer forest cats?! Do you really eat bones and kill kits if they're too weak?!"

For some reason that Splitpaw couldn't fathom, Moonpaw flinched.

"Yup, we do. Now, can you please point us to the end of this place?"

He stepped back. "Y-yeh. It's that way, past those about twenty-or-so gardens. Y-yer going to the mountains?"

Neither of them replied, instead pounded towards where the black and white tom had gestured to with haste that they could blame on the quickly worsening weather. The sky was an angry looking grey-black, the fog changed places with a cold wind warning there was more rain to come.

As long as there's no lightening, Splitpaw muttered in her head.

"Splitkit, get up. Dreamsong wants to look you over," called Strongsoul.

Splitkit yawned and blinked open her eyes. The nest was old; she would have to drag some new reeds from the clearing... but she didn't want to go out there! The cats all looked at her weird. Splitkit knew she was different, but that didn't mean that they could look at her with such... abandon. She had feelings!

Getting up on sore paws and stretching, she looked at her claws. She had found a little stone, small enough for her to carry into the Nursery without suspicion, that if she rubbed her claws against it, it sharpened them. She had no idea when that would help her, since she was still a kit, but maybe she would sink them into Batwing's shoulder...

Just a thought...

She took a deep breath and stepped out of the Nursery. The sun was shining, and cats were already separating into patrols and tasks for the day. After the usual glares, scowls, and flinches were doled out, she pushed her small body past the lichen that hung as a barrier for the Medicine Cat den.

Dreamsong, a pure white she-cat, was mean. There was no better word for it, which Splitkit felt was good to say. The she-cat would just sit and

look at herself in the little puddles that were kept full from the drippings of ferns, and would admire herself! After she had done that, she would pull Splitkit over and they would both stare at her face.

"I know what my face looks like," Splitkit had muttered one day, the days where she wanted to run away and burn her face. To cover one side in mud or just... not be her.

"I know that too, Splitkit. I'm making sure you don't get delusions that you are a normal cat in your head."

The medicine cat huffed when she didn't reply, and stomped out into the open air to make up something to Strongsoul about her being a hopeless case and that there was no hope for her.

Splikit wondered if you looked ugly enough you were considered bad, and if you were good-looking enough, like Batwing, you were considered good, no matter what you said or did.

She hoped it wouldn't always be like that. She just wanted to make friends! She was the only kit, and there were no apprentices, though... she couldn't wait to become a warrior! She would be so strong!

Splitpaw woke from her dream, confused for a moment why her chest was hitching her breath so much. Her and Moonpaw were taking turns letting their eyes rest while the torrential downpour slowed. They still had to cross the Thunderpaths...

A picture of her face in that puddle flashed in her head.

There was a puddle right at her paws. She looked up at Moonpaw, who was glancing at her out of the corner of his eyes.

She flicked her eyes down for a half heartbeat.

She frowned, and broke the flat surface with a unsheathed paw, as if it would make its copy disappear too.

Chapter 15- Colors

She sniffle d . Rainkit t hought she was sad. She never felt it before. From her mother's words, she had been born three sunrises ago. She hadn't open ed her eyes yet. Skyheart is worried; apparently she was supposed to have done that by now. Her father is worried too .

'Don't worry; I just don't think it would be a good idea,' she would try to say, but words would never come out of her mouth. She wasn't sure if it was supposed to be that way... Skyheart didn't seem bothered that Rainkit didn't reply to her mews.

Her mother would tell her everything ; m aybe she thought that if she could make the places you could only see with open eyes seem nice enough then Rainkit would open them. It almost worked , but she was always stopped by this funny feeling... s ort of like she was going to sneeze, but not quite.

What were colors? That was one of the things that Skyheart spoke of that she didn't understand in the slightest. Rainkit hadn't the slightest clue what blue, red, yellow, or orange were. Skyheart said the only color she could see with her eyes closed was black so she was comforted. But s he didn't like the color black. It made her scared.

Her mother would comfort her, still half asleep, to not be afraid of the dark , before she drifted off again into the soft, pain less bliss of sleep.

But the black is everywhere! It was like running away from your breath! Rainkit was sick of it.

The day that she had opened her eyes, the colors had made her head throb. Colors, everywhere! She didn't know what their names were, and she still hadn't after she had been left alone in the Nursery, shunned. She learned through the cracks in the reeds. That had been most of her life.

Her favorite color was green. It was very sparse in the Riverclan camp, with it being brown reeds and bracken, but she saw little bits: the small spouts of moss, the little blades of grass that would spring out between

her claws, or the eyes of the medicine cat who tormented her. She didn't like that green, though.

Ever since she had opened her eyes, the best part about it had been the colors.

That was exactly what Splitpaw lacked right now: color.

It was very dark. Her eyes hurt.

She was a little scared.

There was one thing to keep her from going into a panic: Moonpaw's pelt.

It was soft, and warm. It reminded her that she didn't have her eyes closed: she was padding down a very thin, dark tunnel on the side of the mountain. They had finally made it to the Moonstone; the moon was almost all the way in the sky and they were tired beyond words. The Thunderpaths were silent, there were no monsters.

Moonpaw was pouting that he didn't get to see a monster eat a Twoleg. After he described what he thought it looked like, so was she.

She wished she at least saw a monster! It was empty... the only thing indifferent was the horrid, acrid smells and the rough black rock. They still sped as fast as they could across it.

The tunnel was dark. She couldn't see. And she was scared.

She kept her pelt pressed against Moonpaw's, not trying to make him uncomfortable, but she didn't think she would be okay if she was on her own right now.

She felt him stop in front of her. She stretched her eyes, relief flooding through her like the rain had earlier that day, as there was a faint glow ahead.

They walk up to it.

They stare.

It's smaller than Splitpaw had thought.

"Hey... Splitpaw? Do you think Starclan will... have a prophecy for you? For me?"

She shook her head. If Starclan had something planned for her, they would've visited her sooner.

"Not me, at least. Who knows... maybe you will be like that cat... who Firestar was in those Nursery tales that you told me last night."

He had insisted on telling her a few, upon hearing that she didn't know any.

"...If Starclan doesn't visit you... dream about me, okay?"

Chapter 16- You Said I'm WHAT?

Splitpaw touched her nose to the stone, and she was swept into darkness.

She looked around. Was she to receive a prophecy?

Or was she going to dream about Moonpaw?

Which one would happen?

Which one did she *want* to happen?

It's still dark. She was annoyed. She didn't like the dark! She was in dream! *Would some darn sunlight come in, already?*

As if her thoughts were controlling the dream, sunlight filled her vision. She had to squint for a moment before her dream unfolded.

She is at Fourtrees. The four huge oaks are covered in moss and lichen; she is unable to see the bark anymore. The limbs of the magnificent trees are bent over with the weight of the undergrowth that is growing on top of it.

"That is you, Splitface," a voice called out to her.

Wait, Splitface?

She spun around to see a tom she didn't recognize, but she could tell that he was Riverclan almost instantly by his glossy fur and wet bangs.

"What do you want?" she spat. She hated Riverclan. She didn't want to talk to this tom, even if he was a Starclan spirit.

"To simply speak to you, can I ask that of you?"

No, you can't, she thought sourly, but she saw nothing else to do, and it might save Shadowclan, or herself, so she nodded reluctantly and sat down with a frown.

The Riverclan tom was standing next to her, too close for her comfort, but she didn't want to anger a Starclan cat, Riverclan or not.

"What did you mean, 'that is you'? And my name's not Splitface!"

The tom looked at her, and she realized that she could not see his eyes; they were completely covered by his bangs, which were making puddles on the ground.

Oh, great Starclan, she knew who this cat was.

Iceheart.

Splitpaw had met him the day she opened her eyes to the world, and he was the one who made the puddle, that made her see what she was.

"First off, I called you Splitpath, not Splitface. Second, you are that great oak. You will be something great, respected, powerful... if you are not crushed first."

"Crushed? What do you mean?"

Iceheart gestured to the tree that was supposed to be her.

The oak was almost bent in half. Lichen, moss, ferns... everything that was usually on the forest floor was on this tree, and it was killing it.

Suddenly, as if triggered by her thoughts, the trunk snapped so loud that Splitpaw winced. She watched as the elegant, beautiful tree fell to the ground.

When it hits, her chest explodes into pain. She groans, and kneels to the ground. She can see stars.

She is taking deep breaths, trying to focus on anything besides the

pain, when Iceheart comes over to her. Upon his touch, the pain disappears. She frowns and turns around to give him reluctant thanks.

He is gone, in his place is an enormous puddle.

She didn't have to look, did she?

She took a deep breath, and bent her head over the edge.

She does not see herself.

Instead, she sees three toms. The first two she easily recognizes as Bonepaw and Moonpaw. The third, a silver-blue, blinks back at her confused stare with a kind light. It seems as though Bonepaw and Moonpaw can't see her. They are just looking straight ahead.

Splitpaw is about to call their names when she is pushed from behind by something unseeable, and she tumbles into the water.

She wakes to find herself on the floor of the Moonstone, Moonpaw just beginning to awaken.

Was that it? She would either prosper or... be crushed?!

"...Splitpaw? How was your.... dream?" Moonpaw's sleep-heavy voice was broken by his yawn.

"F-Fine, and yours?"

"It was fine. I dreamed about you, actually," he said with a goofy grin.

He awaited her reaction.

"Yeah, you could say I dreamt about you too."

Chapter 17- Yay! Leaf-Bare Is Coming

The descent from the mountain in the morning light was peaceful, if you could ignore Moonpaw's clumsy stumbles, sending rocks into tumbles down the slight cliffs to the grassy meadows of Windclan's territory about twenty tail-lengths below. The silence between them was comfortable, both of them still tired from their small doze at the Moonstone.

To Splitpaw it had been disgruntling, having been told that she was like one of the great oaks at Fourtrees by the ignorant tom she had known in Riverclan, Iceheart.

To be honest, she didn't remember anything else after that. Like, she knew that something else happened, she knew that, she just didn't know... what.

"It sure is getting foggy... the leaf-bare weather is starting to set in! I can't wait to see snow! It's supposed to be so white that it makes your eyes hurt and cold enough to make your tongue numb!"

Moonpaw is suddenly spouting random things about the upcoming cold season. Against her will, she wondered how Riverclan survived if snow was supposed to bring a chill that would freeze the rushing, powerful river. She had seen it once, when she had been dragged to the gathering, and she found it hard to believe that the river could be tamed by a cold wind.

But, of course, that had nothing to do with her. She didn't care if Riverclan would suffer this leaf-bare.

"...Splitpaw? Are you listening to me at all?!" Moonpaw walked up in front of her and stood in her path, looking at her with an annoyed expression.

"...No, sorry, Moonpaw. What did you want to tell me?"

"That I can smell a Windclan patrol nearby, but I think if we hurry we won't be confronted."

"Would they confront us? We're just two apprentices!"

Moonpaw paused in his tracks and looked at her like she was a frog-brain.

"Yeah, two *Shadowclan* apprentices. Haven't you been told the stories about how Shadowclan makes their 'paws eat bones to become warriors?"

"Uh... no?"

"Well, those rumors are out there, and I'm pretty sure Windclan wouldn't just let us go by."

Now on edge, Splitpaw looked out into the tall grasses. While talking, they had left the rocky mountain path and their sore paws were greeted by lush green stalks of grass once more. The sky was indeed getting foggy, accompanied by a cold, dewy wind and the sense of coming rain from the direction of the heavily covered sun. The grass around them waved around in a rhythm of mayhem as the wind increased.

"We better leave here before the rain comes, or we'll be soaked again!"

"...Yeah," Moonpaw muttered, looking into the grass on his side. His ears were pricked and eyes narrowed, making Splitpaw go into high alert. She didn't hear anything, but she could smell the wild scent of Windclan cats.

"Let's get out of here, before we get caught too," she muttered, unsettled by Moonpaw's wariness.

"Not so fast, you guys," a smooth voice called out from a gap in the grasses ahead.

Both of them gasping, they took a moment to pry their eyes away from the tom to get into fighting positions.

The tom was a light blue-silver with icy, pale blue eyes. He was larger than her (which wasn't saying much) and a bit taller than Moonpaw, but he was most likely a young warrior.

"Why are you two on Windclan's territory?" he asked. His eyes weren't narrowed, but his lithe, thin form was tense. It was obvious he didn't think of them as a threat, and that irritated Splitpaw. Just because she was small didn't mean that she was weak!

"We are on Shadowclan business," Moonpaw stated boldly, his voice sounding much braver than she knew he felt.

"What does Shadowclan need at Windclan's empty border?"

"We just got back from the Moonstone, thank you,"

"Oh yeah? Where's your mentors?"

"I-it's part of the assignment for us to go alone,"

The tom looked amused.

"I didn't know Shadowclan did this too!"

Splitpaw and Moonpaw both looked at the silver grey tom with confusion. What in Starclan was he talking about?!

"Haha! I really got you guys! I'm not a silly Windclan cat! I'm a Riverclan apprentice. They sent me on this task without a mentor too! It's totally mouse-brained, don't you think?"

Splitpaw stared. This cat was a Riverclan cat? But she didn't recognize...

It was then with a jolt she realized that this cat can't be Riverclan, she was the only kit in the clan at the time!

He was also one of the only cats to not have flinched or said anything about her face by now.

...And he claims he's Riverclan, the clan that abused her.

So, why did she think he was cool?

Chapter 18- He Has A Name Now

"Yeah, it's crazy," Moonpaw muttered, sending a sidelong glance at Splitpaw as if to say, 'who in Starclan is this mouse-brained tom?', or at least that's what she read out of it.

The tom sat down, as if nothing was out of place, and started cleaning his paws. His lithe grey-silver body, now that he told them what clan he was from, held obvious signs of Riverclan, such as his hooked claws and glossy fur. He has larger than normal paws, each looking fluffy and adorabl-

Wait, what was she thinking?! He was *Riverclan,* it didn't matter that his paws looked softer than swan feathers, she will still hate him! He's Riverclan, the clan that abused her. Ignored her. Destroyed her early moons. Made her apprentice training twice as hard as it should be, and made her feel like a stranger in her own body at times.

"I caught a rabbit a bit earlier and it was too big for me to finish, so if you two want some you can," the tom spoke after a moment's more of cleaning, and got up. He reminded her of another cat, she realized, but she couldn't remember who...

"Wait, isn't that breaking the Warrior Code?! You can't hunt on another clan's territory!" Moonpaw looked bothered. It was one thing that they were talking with a Riverclan cat, but it was a completely different leaf if said tom just broke the Code.

"Who cares? Haven't you heard? Windclan is extremely short on cats right now, they won't risk losing any more in petty prey fights."

Moonpaw looked taken aback, and struggled for a retort. The tom didn't look satisfied that Moonpaw didn't agree.

"Besides, maybe I am Windclan, and I'm just testing you to see how

you react to a cat breaking the Warrior Code?"

Splitpaw's head started to hurt. Would he really do something like that? Would he attack them for being on his territory after all?

"Or maybe I'm Thunderclan, and I'm speaking to you because we're about to ambush Windclan's camp? What would you two do then?"

Saying the last part, he looked straight into her eyes. Splitpaw tried to imagine what he saw when he looked at her.

He saw a small she-cat, the size of a large kit with a messy pelt, full of black and orange, with a ruffled white chest and underbelly. He saw perked ears, angled to take up every noise, eyes that were strangely two different colors, a nose that was split in two, and a face that should make him wince, flinch and turn away...

But he hasn't. This silver tom hasn't flinched at her. He hasn't mentioned her face, or her eyes... or even say anything to her.

"Well, never mind that, 'cause I am Riverclan, on a mouse-brained *mission* without a mentor, heading to the Twoleg place to grab catmint. We don't even need catmint! We have plenty, I saw Dreamsong with two huge piles drying in the sun! 'It's good experience,' my mentor tells me!"

Splitpaw flinched only the slightest bit when the medicine cat's name was called. The tom's eyes flickered to her for half a heartbeat before going back to coasting over the edges of grass.

Moonpaw, not caring in the slightest, had gone and dragged the rabbit out into the open to start eating. He motioned with his head, asking her if she wanted any, but it felt like the traveling herbs were still working for her, she felt really... full, even though she felt her stomach grumbling quietly.

"Oh, I'm Rapidpaw by the way, what are your names?"

"I'mph Moonpaw," her partner mumbled through a mouthful of rabbit.

"Apmh shmps-" the mouse-brain grey tom finally swallowed the

rabbit in his mouth.

"And she's Splitpaw."

Rapidpaw looked at her for another moment, then up at the sky, which although still dark and cloudy, one could tell it wouldn't be long before the sun began setting.

"I've got to go if I want to make it to the Twoleg place by tonight, I'll see you guys at the Gathering!"

Moonpaw nodded, took one last bite of the rabbit, and began to disappear into the grass.

Splitpaw was just about to follow him into the shadows when a tail wrapped around hers.

"Promise you'll come to the Gathering?"

Rapidpaw's pale blue eyes stared right back into hers with intensity that took Splitpaw by surprise and left her a stuttering mess, "Y-Yeah, I'll... I'll try,"

He grinned, white fangs flashing, "Great, I'll see you there!"

And just like that, he was gone. What in Starclan...

So, he was a Riverclan tom. An apprentice, probably around her age of nine moons.

But, even if he was older, there had been no apprentices in Riverclan when she was born. She was an only kit to Strongsoul and Skyheart.

So, who was Rapidpaw?

Chapter 19- Finally Back Home

They finally reached Shadowclan territory as the sun was finishing its beautiful descent into the tree line, and Silverpelt was already shining behind them. The air around them was cool, it was not hot enough to have little bugs fly around their ears, but the sounds of frogs in the marsh was almost deafening.

It was so comforting to have Shadowclan's pine trees engulf them once more; it was like being surrounded by everything she loved. Splitpaw couldn't wait to collapse into her own comfy nest and drift off into a peaceful, dreamless sleep...

"Hey, look Coalfoot, they're back!"

Moonpaw's ears pricked as he heard Bravepaw's excited mew break through the pines. The ginger tom's pelt was obvious after another moment, Coalfoot taking another moment to spot with her dark grey-black pelt. So, Bonepaw and Bravepaw had already made it back from the Moonstone...

"Bravepaw! You guys are already back? How was your journey?"

The two toms padded off back towards the camp, snorting and laughing in such a way that they startled a group of crows that were making ear-throbbing noises and made them fly away in a panic.

Shaking her head at those two toms, she turned her head back and nodded her head to her mentor. Had Coalfoot shrank since Splitpaw had left? She was now shoulder height with the warrior...

"I watched you two until you arrived at the Twoleg place... how did it go after?"

Splitpaw explained to Coalfoot how they had passed through the two Thunderpaths without trouble, shared tongues with Starclan, left and went through the territories once more back to where they

were now.

She did not mention Rapidpaw.

She doesn't know why.

While explaining, they had begun to make their way back to camp, the sun just about to set and sending the pines and marsh into long shadows and dim beams of light.

"Well, it certainly looks like you and Moonpaw came back for better and not worse, that's good. I'm thinking about the possibility of making you two Partners once you become warriors... maybe. Keep up the good work, Splitpaw. To think you've been here for only three moons... I'm impressed."

Coalfoot left her with these words, moving swiftly past the brambles and into the clearing full of the scents of cats that she hadn't seen in almost three sunrises. She wondered how Driftpaw's partnership with the warrior went, and if they were back yet.

If Bravepaw was back, then so would Bonepaw, she realized. No sooner had she thought this, she was almost scared soulless by the white, black pawed apprentice.

"Ah! Don't scare me like that, you mouse-brain!"

Bonepaw's dark blue eyes glowed in the dim light.

"Sorry," he mumbled, looking up at Silverpelt with a pained expression and a huff.

Splitpaw somehow felt responsible for his sudden mood shift. "Uh... sorry. How was your journey?"

Still with his neck craned upwards, he peeked at her staring earnestly back from the corner of his eyes.

"It was... uneventful, besides Bravepaw's constant complaining. You?"

"Oh, uh... cool. Mine was... fine."

Bonepaw looked at her.

"Whatever you say. I made you a new nest, I knew you would be tired after being Partners with Moonpaw and his suffocating personality."

Splitpaw was about to defend her Partner, but a huge yawn made its way up her throat and made her jaw stretch, Bonepaw taking that as an agreement.

"Come on, I found a couple of feathers at the marsh today..."

Bonepaw's voice drifted off as he pushed past the brambles. Splitpaw sighed, wanting to just stay and look up at the stars of her ancestors, but the ache in her body and the fog in her brain that had been hanging over her since she had met Rapidpaw made her paws follow the white tom back to the Shadowclan camp.

Everyone was getting ready for a night's sleep or the moon-high border patrol, so the clearing was fairly deserted. She almost tumbled over to the fresh-kill pile, but she was able to properly run over without tripping over herself.

Splitpaw scarfed down a small mouse, licking her lips with a contented sigh, wanting nothing more than to close her eyes that very heartbeat and sleep, but her pelt was in a state less pleasant than she would like, and it was something that her mind wouldn't let her put off until morning.

Pushing herself through the bush to the apprentice den, she felt warm inside to see her nest, fluffy with bright green moss and lined with brown feathers. Bonepaw had seemed to have moved his nest, making it slightly closer to hers.

Her eyes slowly adjusting, she settled down and began the laborious task of making herself presentable for the morning.

She had only been cleaning for a couple of heartbeats when she almost jumped out of her fur. Bonepaw's tongue was on her back, on the one spot she had been struggling to reach without waking everyone.

Speechless, she just stared as he finished the spot and pulled a couple of leaves from the scruff of the back of her neck.

"It would've taken you all night otherwise," he mumbled, averting his eyes, which were shining.

"T-Thanks," she stuttered.

"No problem..... sleep well."

Starclan, was she tired! Between Moonpaw the weird, Rapidpaw the mysterious, and Bonepaw the confusing... she's impressed she made it through the day at all. Now she just had to go the gathering.

Which was tomorrow night.

Chapter 20- The Shiny Things

The morning she woke up, Splitpaw could already tell it was going to be a bad day. Maybe it was her pelt, which both she and Bonepaw had cleaned the night before, which was now looking even messier than it had been. Maybe it was her head, which was pounding like a heartbeat behind her ears.

Either way, the sky — a stormy grey with bitter winds making it feel like they were hairless — matched her mood exactly.

Of course, everyone else was absolutely spectacular.

"Hey Splitpaw!" Bravepaw called her over, once she finally got up from her nest. She could barely keep her eyes open, but she dragged her paws over to where the rest of the apprentices were and practically collapsed onto the ground, only bothering to nod when Driftpaw passed her part of a mouse.

"We were just discussing what warrior names we will get! Hey, Splitpaw, don't you think that Braveswipe is an awesome name or what?!"

"Yeah, it's amazing," she muttered. She didn't want to be rude, but she just wanted to... be asleep.

Bravepaw, being the mouse-brain that he is, wasn't fazed at her unenthusiastic response in the slightest.

"Hey, guys, what would be a good name for Splitpaw?"

There was a mixture of amusement and uncomfortableness as they glanced at each other, Bonepaw, Driftpaw, and Moonpaw.

"Bravepaw... this isn't a good id—"

"Oh, be quiet, Driftpaw, and let me think up of a good one! It's no fun with her, though... it's obvious that her name's gonna be Splitface..."

Moonpaw, looking.... like something, just peeked at her before filling his vision with a half-eaten frog. Driftpaw huffed, too bothered by Bravepaw's rudeness to defend Splitpaw. Bonepaw was trying to think of something to say to her, glaring at Bravepaw, but before he could speak empty words of comfort she felt her body push herself off the hard ground and towards the forest.

"Splitpaw, wait—"

"Leave me alone."

Splitpaw was lost. What was wrong with her today? She felt so... real. No, not real... but the feelings that she felt for her mother, father, Riverclan... she just woke up not being able to hold them back. It shocked her how hard it had been to hold them inside of her head, like a fox stuck in brambles, rearing its ugly head at the slightest sound.

She barely felt her paws hit the pine strewn forest floor as her trot turned into a run, her head tucking into her chest to protect her eyes and snout from the low hanging pine needles as she sped towards... nowhere.

Riverclan... she didn't have words for that clan. No kind words at least. Splitpaw had done nothing wrong but be born, and she had been shunned, ignored, isolated, and hated. She grew up thinking that she was evil, an abomination.

She still remembers that day too.

She had been cleaning her pelt like she had been for the past five moons. Splitpaw swore, if she padded outside she would be painful to look at directly, her fur would reflect the light of the sun.

She thought her fur would look just like the Shiny Things.

The Shiny Things appeared in her nest when she woke up from a stressful night's sleep after the lightning made her squeal and eventually pass out from exhaustion. When she woke the next day, there were little pieces of the Shiny Things in front of her, arranged in a perfect little circle.

At first, when she was younger, she thought they were from Starclan. Were they sending them to her to make sure that she would believe in them? To tell her that there was a prophecy to come about her?

But as the moons went by and she went from a little kit to... well, a bigger kit, she knew that these weren't from her starry ancestors. Who, she didn't know, but just... not them.

It would take more than Shiny Things to make her forgive them for making her so ugly.

The Shiny Things were small, probably about the size of her little kit claws, thin and flakey. Sometimes, when she had groomed her pelt so much she was impressed that she wasn't stiff, she would lick her sore tongue across her paw, press it up against the little pile of Shiny Things in the corner of the Nursery and try to catch her reflection.

Was she really so ugly after all? The reflections with the tiny pieces were horrible, disordered and bumpy, but she didn't look bad... the cats in Riverclan had pretty plain pelts. Was it not refreshing to have a cat with more than amber or golden eyes and black, tan, or white fur?

Eventually she had started to question even her own thoughts. If her face was messed up, why not her thoughts too? Maybe her very mind was ugly. Maybe she would be like Tiger, the tom that Skyheart told her about, before she had opened her different eyes

Once upon a time there had been a cat called Tiger. He had been a very bad cat. He didn't like listening to the leader, so he left Windclan and went to Thunderclan, where he killed kits and made cats very sad. One day Tiger got what was coming and he died under Starclan's words of justice.

The end.

Splitkit had worried her end would be from sadness.

Chapter 21- That Poor Frog

It took a while to calm down.

And when she said a while, she meant she had enough time to catch three frogs and a squirrel before she stopped heaving curses at Riverclan in her mind.

She was in a part of the territory she hadn't been in before; it was pretty steep, with very small, thin pine trees closely packed together. The sun, now on the other side of the sky, was beginning to set as she went back to the camp with her anger-fueled catches.

The sky was orange with the setting sun, clouds rippling shades of purple. The full moon that signaled the Gathering was already shining brightly against the surrounding sky. Taking a deep breath, she prepared herself for finding out if she was going or not. The odds were that she was; the last two, while she was in Shadowclan, had gone by while she grew stronger — albeit slowly — and she was probably just physically strong enough to return to those four huge oaks now.

Her neck aching, she pushed through the bracken only pausing when one of the frogs that had been hanging half out of her mouth caught on a thorn and made a pretty big mess.

Make that two frogs and a squirrel.

"Splitpaw! Where were you?!"

Mouse-dung! She forgot that she had basically skipped the day. At least Sharpstar had given them the day off for their recovery from the journey, but it was still new to her that cats actually cared where she was.

"Sorry, Coalfoot, I lost track of time."

The smoky grey she-cat looked skeptical, "Of the whole day?"

"...Yeah. I caught some prey, though. I'll go bring it to the elders now."

Slipping past her mentor with a quiet sigh, she padded rather quickly over to the small bracken-protected den where the two elders, Barkfall and Briarscratch resided.

The two elders, mates for countless seasons, were both very kind. Barkfall was a skinny grey tom, whose fur was missing in places and revealed the soft pink flesh below. Briarscratch was skinny as well, but her joints ached so much she barely ever got up anymore, except to go to the dirtplace.

Splitpaw had no idea why they were so skinny; they ate more than she did half of the time.

Pushing through the trundles of bracken she greeted the old mates and placed the prey beside their nests.

"Thank you, dear, I was just craving some frog something fierce!"

Letting out the shadow of a purr, Briarscratch licked Splitpaw's ear and began to tear apart the poor green piece of prey.

"What she said," muttered Barkfall around a mouthful of squirrel. After another nod Splitpaw backed out of the elder's den and bumped Bravepaw on the way.

"Oh, um... I'm sorry for earlier, Splitpaw. For calling you—"

"AHEM..."

Bravepaw flinched when Driftpaw's voice from the edge of the clearing interrupted him. The bossy grey apprentice's hazel eyes glared into the ginger's back, and he shifted uncomfortably and struggled to recover from almost offending her even more.

"What I meant to say was..."

Chuckling a bit, Splitpaw decided to free him from the torment.

"It's okay, Bravepaw. I was just... really tired this morning."

"Oh. Okay then! Oh, and Sharpstar said that she wants to talk to you, by the way."

"Thanks," she muttered.

"No problem!"

Oh, great Starclan, she was in trouble for running off, wasn't she?!

Nerves shaking her paws, she made her way to the fern-shrouded leader's den, heart beating a fast-paced-run in her chest.

The russet leader was hunched over a huge leaf, one of countless many that littered the whole area, along with the black, dull rocks that made her nose wrinkle involuntary.

"Ah. Come in, Splitpaw," ordered the leader, looking up from the leaf, "You're not in any sort of trouble."

The weight that seemed to be looming over her had lifted and floated away, along with a breath that she had been holding.

"What do you need from me, then?"

"Well, I wanted to ask you if you wanted to go to the Gathering? It's just because Riverclan will be there, and... well, I don't blame you for not going if you don't want to..."

Heat burned inside her at the mention of the fish-eating clan, "No, I'll go, Sharpstar... I just might not be the happiest cat there, that's all."

"Well, in that case, go grab a piece of prey and get ready to go... can you also tell Bonepaw that he's going to be your Partner for the Gathering? I'd like someone to keep an eye on you, just in case."

"Yes, Sharpstar."

Chapter 22- Between a Bone and the Rapids

"Bonepaw, you're my Partner for the Gathering," Splitpaw called out from the fresh-kill pile to the apprentices who were eating around a couple frogs. Grabbing a vole, she padded over and tried not to act so nervous about going to the Gathering.

Riverclan was going to be there. Maybe her parents. Definitely cats that had shunned her.

New cats would be there, also. More cats to flinch at her face.

But, the little voice in her head reminded her that there could also be some new friends there too.

And another thing...

The strange Riverclan cat, Rapidpaw, would be there.

"...Splitpaw? I said are you ready? The group is getting together..."

Splitpaw was shaken out of her head by Bonepaw's mew. Muttering her answer through the last bite of vole, she got up and followed the black pawed apprentice to the entrance where the rest of the cats who were going was waiting.

Apparently, she and Bonepaw were the only 'paws going this moon, but this did little to comfort her. The more Splitpaw thought about it, the less she wanted to confront her past; especially with Bonepaw watching her.

The journey to Fourtrees wasn't as bad as she had remembered it to be when she was a kit. The sky was clear, the pinpoints of Silverpelt starting to show in the dark blue sky and the full moon had a reddish tint to it.

"Now, Splitpaw, stick close to me at the Gathering, okay? There are

a lot of huge cats and I don't want you to get lost—"

"Don't worry, I've been to one before, I understand..."

Bonepaw gave her a suspicious sideways glance. "How in Starclan have you been to a...? Oh. I... uh... forgot about that, sorry Splitpaw. I guess... I guess Riverclan will be there too, won't they...?"

Trying not to have her problems on the sweet tom's shoulders, she faked a smile, "Well, it is a Gathering now, isn't it? I'd hope Riverclan would be there!"

Thankfully, Bonepaw seemed to let the conversation slip into something more comfortable (how Bravepaw and Driftpaw had been getting awfully cozy together...) and let Splitpaw worry in peace.

What if Strongsoul and Skyheart were there? What would she say? Would she say anything at all? What would they say? Sure, she had grown, but... and of course, Dreamsong the Riverclan medicine cat would be there, probably Batwing too.

And Glowstar.

They neared the rim of the slight slope that led down to the crowds upon crowds of cats below. All pelts, all sizes, with three different scents assaulted her senses, and she found herself unconsciously searching for cats that were from Riverclan.

"Hey, Splitpaw, let me show you to the other clan's apprentices! There are so many!"

Letting a white tail guide her through the masses of cats that didn't seem to notice her, they came to a small pine where the younger cats were sharing tongues.

"Hey, Bonepaw!" a fluffy grey tom called from the base of the trunk.

"Oh, hey, Fuzzypaw! You too, guys!"

Following Bonepaw over to the cats who smelled like the moors and

were quite skinny, she was greeted with averted glances from some and smiles from others.

"Splitpaw, these are Windclan's apprentices. Can you believe there are eight of them?! I can barely handle our other three!"

"You're telling me," grumbled a black and white splotched she-cat.

"Don't mind Thornpaw," Fuzzypaw joked, "Her mentor, Whiteflower, saw her miss a huge grey rabbit this morning and she has been in a sour mood ever since!"

"Fuzzypaw... be nice, please!" a hazel she-cat tried to say loudly, but ended up getting overtaken by a brown tom who leapt over her and tackled a skinny silver tom who was staring at Splitpaw's face.

Bonepaw, laughing, pointed out to her that the hazel she-cat was Heatherpaw, the tom that had leapt over her was Mudpaw, and the skinny silver tom was Icepaw, along with one other, a slight ginger tom named Foxpaw.

Leaving the wrestling mass of Windclan apprentices, they greeted a slightly smaller group of Thunderclan 'paws; Sunpaw, Rockpaw, and Hailpaw had proven to be a lot... quieter than Windclan, but they didn't look at her, except for one who was dragged away by a bright silver cat when she had gone over to Splitpaw.

Lousy mouse-brains, she muttered in her head and turned, now searching for that lithe, silver grey pelt that smelled of reeds and fresh water...

Rapidpaw was nowhere to be seen, but she did find something else: Strongsoul, a strong Riverclan tom with tan fur and a ginger stripe from nose to tail... who was none other than her father.

And a heartbeat later, Rapidpaw joined him at his side. Blue eyes met her mismatched ones and he grinned and beckoned her and Bonepaw over.

"Hey, I've never seen him before! Let's go say hi!"

Splitpaw took a moment too long to voice her opinion. Strongsoul

turned around and stared straight at her. His icy eyes bore into hers. She felt such a strange, burning sensation in her pelt, and she felt the overwhelming urge to look away.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Bonepaw and Rapidpaw watching with confusion, only after another moment Bonepaw's transformed into understanding.

Her father's voice was cold as he spoke to Rapidpaw beside him still, "Rapidpaw, leave, this does not concern you."

"But—"

"Go!"

"No! What do you have to do with her?"

"I told you, its nothing—"

"You're her father," Bonepaw spat, finally propelled to his paws as he stood protectively in front of her.

"Get out of my way, 'paw! This has nothing to do with either of you!"

Both toms flattened their ears at her father's harsh tone.

No, this cat was not her father.

"You don't have anything to do with me, either," she said quietly.

Not only him, but the two apprentices and some other cats who had been watching with interested eyes flashed to her.

"What did you say?" Strongsoul's voice was dangerously low.

"I said... you don't have anything to do with me, either, Strongsoul," she felt a flare of confidence surge through her chest. It felt good.

"Why, you little... you don't speak to your father that way!"

Finally, it all broke free. She shouldered Bonepaw away, ignoring his voice of warning, and got right up in her father's face, less than

a claw-length away from touching noses. In the back of her mind she relished how she was almost his height.

"You're not my father. You were never my father. Riverclan was never my clan. You shunned me, left me alone, and never showed me love. I hate you!"

"I—"

"Strongsoul, I think you might want to stop... you're making Starclan angry." Sandflame muttered, gesturing up to the moon with her ginger tail, becoming partially covered with clouds.

"It's not me! It's her! See, Splitpaw? Even Starclan thinks you're a mistake!" he sneered. It wouldn't have been so bad, but the other cats from Riverclan, like Batwing, had come and were whispering about her to the rest of the clans. More and more cats stepped away from her, until only she was in a circle as wide as two cats. Bonepaw had disappeared, and Rapidpaw looked conflicted.

The confidence Splitpaw had felt earlier was gone.

Was... was she really a mistake?

Chapter 23- Well?

Okay, Splitpaw prided herself on being self-reliant, but even she could admit that she was scared and needed some help right now. Her father, Strongsoul, had cornered her into a very bad situation. He had convinced almost half of the Gathering that she was the reason the moon was becoming covered in clouds... that Starclan was angry with her. She had finally stood up to one of the main reasons she was the way she was, but it had backfired.

Bonepaw was nowhere to be seen, and now neither was Rapidpaw. Cats around her were murmuring and looking at Splitpaw suspiciously.

"What clan is that poor cat in?" whispered a white she-cat with a black tail to a dark ginger tom with golden stripes.

"I don't know, Raventail, but she smells like a Shadowclan cat!"

"I've never seen her before," whispered a calico she-cat who padded over to where the other two were sitting as Splitpaw was stuck in the middle of the cats.

"Me neither, Hollywing, I'm sure I would've remembered a face... like that."

"Yeah... what do you think, Greywillow?"

"Hmmph... I don't know what Shadowclan is trying to pull, bringing it here."

"Oh, come on... maybe that little cat isn't the most pleasant to look at, but maybe she had nothing to do with it, Greywillow! I'm sure you don't think because Silentfeather is deaf she's an 'it,' do you?" argued a silver she-cat. They all glanced at Splitpaw.

"I... I guess not, but that cat... I've never seen anything of the likes of her. Do you think this is a message from Starclan or something?"

Then, right when the ginger tom — who's name she had caught to be Blazestrike — had been about to answer, Batwing had pushed his snotty pelt right up into the small group of Thunderclanners, "Yeah, like how Starclan is warning us not to trust her? She just looks like an evil cat! You have no idea what's running through her head!"

Anger rushed through her. That stupid tom... what had she ever done to him?! That amber-eyed cat was asking for her to claw his eyes out...

A few Windclan cats were siding with the idea that Shadowclan was up to something.

"Why else would they bring such a huge distraction? They're planning an ambush, I tell you, and that 'paw over there is the best diversion they could ever ask for!" a tiny grey she-cat yowled to the Gathering and all who were listening.

"Skyrunner, calm down! Even if that was the case, which it's not, you're not helping anything," an older grey she-cat mumbled, looking up at the moon, now all but disappeared in the clouds of Starclan's anger. A cold, shiver-inducing breeze ruffled the leaves of the Fourtrees.

"But Frozenfire—"

Then, like a savior, the four leaders came out from their space behind the oak trees and climbed their own tree.

"What seems to be the problem," boomed the Thunderclan leader, a huge black tom with bright green eyes. He had been the first to look away when she had first come to the Gathering as a kit.

"Fernstar... Shadowclan brought an apprentice that had quite the... looks about her," claimed a cat in the crowds, towards the front.

Fernstar looked between the other two leaders, Glowstar and the Windclan leader, before addressing Sharpstar.

"Is this true, Sharpstar?"

"Yes," she replied dryly, "I do believe that I can bring whatever cats I want to this Gathering,"

"Yes," interjected the ginger Windclan leader, "But did you really have to bring... her? She is causing quite a disruption! She should be ashamed of herself!"

Okay.

That.

Was.

It.

"I can't help it!" she yowled at the top of her voice, squeezing her eyes shut and letting the echo of her words settle in the deathly quiet clearing.

"I can't help that I was born this way! Do you all honestly think that I asked to be this way? That I wanted to look like this? I can't help that I wasn't perfect for you, Strongsoul, or good enough to be in Riverclan, but don't blame Sharpstar or anyone else! Just try to see it from my point of view! What if you were the one with something wrong with you, but you thought it was perfectly normal? What if every... every cat that looked at you flinched or made rude comments about you? If they kicked you out of everything you've ever known? How would you feel?"

Sobs had made her stutter towards the end, but it felt so good just to yowl it out to the clearing moon and stars of her otherworldly ancestors.

It was too quiet for her comfort.

"Well?" she said softly.

Chapter 24- Excuse Me?

"Well said, Splitpaw. Can I speak to you for a moment?" Sharpstar ushered her to the edge of the clearing while the other leaders tried to calm down their respective clans.

"I'm proud of you, Splitpaw. I know it took a lot of courage to say what you did," Sharpstar started, but Splitpaw, tired, cut her off.

"It's okay, Sharpstar, I just want to think for a while. Go ahead and do what you need to do, I'll be fine."

The russet leader didn't look convinced, but she nodded and backed up a bit.

"Okay, I'll send Bonepaw over, I had him and that Riverclan apprentice keep their distance from you, I knew you would have wanted to resolve this on your own."

Splitpaw nodded and said nothing. Sharpstar padded off to gather Shadowclan back into order.

So, Bonepaw and Rapidpaw hadn't deserted her. At least there was that.

Would Riverclan finally back down and admit all that they had done wrong? Pricking her ears to the leaders giving their reports, her doubtful thoughts were confirmed as Glowstar's yowl rang through the cold night's bitter air.

"We were very kind, giving Splitpaw a second chance in the clans, but we were also wrong. After much consideration with my deputy, we have decided to take Splitpaw back to Riverclan, where she belongs."

What?

This is exactly what she had wanted to hear, those first few sunrises after she had been met with hostility, not almost eleven moons

later! But still... they were asking for her back. They wanted her back. They admitted that they were wrong, and she was needed back in Riverclan.

Of course, then Bonepaw and Rapidpaw decided to rush towards her, oblivious to what Glowstar had stated.

"Splitpaw, are you okay?! I heard what you said, but Sharpstar..." the white apprentice fretted with a worried and pained expression, and she could almost feel the sadness on his tongue.

"It's okay, Bonepaw. I'm fine."

"Yeah, but..."

Rapidpaw stood awkwardly behind Bonepaw, looking down at the ground sheepishly.

"I didn't know my mentor was your father, Splitpaw. I'm sorry."

Splitpaw sighed again. They really hadn't heard what Glowstar had said.

She wished she hadn't either.

Chapter 25- Hey, StarClan, it's Splitpaw

"So, Splitpaw, what were the leaders talking about? We were searching for you and didn't really hea—"

Bonepaw was cut off by Glowstar. The fluffy white she-cat, with her deputy and Dreamsong close behind, pushed right up past both him and Rapidpaw and stood imposingly before her.

"We would like to speak with you in private, Splitpaw. I'm sure you... understand."

She had half a mind to say 'no, I don't understand,' just to see what the horrible leader would say.

"Sure, I guess," is what ended up being muttered out of her mouth. She glanced at the two toms from the corners of her eyes; she couldn't meet their confused stares and confusion.

It ended up, only Glowstar walked with her to a secluded part of the clearing. She didn't want to know what lies the other two were spreading about feeling sorry and wanting her back.

As the glow of the full moon — now sliding slightly onto the other side of the sky — gently became hidden from view by orange leaves, Glowstar stopped, turning to Splitpaw and staring at her face before looking away.

"So, what do you say? Will you come home to where you belong, or stay with filthy Shadowclan?"

She already looked as if Splitpaw was going to lick her paws, thank her, and beg for forgiveness and the privilege of being in Riverclan again.

Honestly, Splitpaw was still baffled. Did they really want her back?

After all that they had said about her? She wondered if Batwing agreed with this, or her mother and father. Did they want her back? As much as she felt herself wanting to hear it... She found it very hard to believe, but...

"I'm... I'm not sure. Can you... g-give me time to think?"

Glowstar gave her a scorning look, "Do you really need to wonder? To think? You know Riverclan is your home, your family... why would you not want that? Why would you even consider staying with Shadowclan?"

"Maybe because you all showed me nothing but aggressiveness, hate, and negligence? Just a thought," she snapped, her irritation peaking at how Glowstar could be so oblivious to the pain they had caused her.

"Oh, Splitpaw! Is this really what it's all about? You were upset because you didn't get enough attention? That we were mean?"

"Y-You- it's not about being mean, it's about how you affected me! I'm weaker than all of my other friends, because no one would play... with... me."

Okay, when she said it like that, it did sound pretty silly and small... but they still affected her so much!

"Now, Splitpaw, I know you are angry, but there is no need to blame Riverclan because you're weak."

Shame coursed through her. Glowstar was speaking to her like she was a naughty kit that had eaten crow-food.

"I can't look at my reflection! You and all of Riverclan made me hate my looks and feel so unwanted!"

"I can't help you were born ugly," the Riverclan leader snapped, "And it was just your little kit head wanting more attention. All of this is inside your head, Splitpaw!"

"Then why... why did you rename me 'Split?' Why did you offer me up to the clans like prey? Why didn't you... want me?"

Glowstar sighed like this was stressful for her or something, and looked at her tiredly.

"No one likes an ugly cat. I can't help that, Splitpaw. I didn't change your name, your mother and father did. I didn't give you up, your parents did. I had nothing to do with this, and your kittish attitude is becoming very unattractive and annoying. Now, the Gathering is over, I have to leave, and I will expect an answer by the next."

"But... I have my assessments for my warrior ceremony coming up! I don't think..."

"Think what, Splitpaw? That you will stay with some stupid clan that doesn't have anything to do with you? That doesn't have your family in it? That doesn't make you who you are? Listen, Splitpaw, Riverclan is your everything. You seem to have loyalty issues and need me to make that clear. There is Riverclan in your blood, and every moment you spend with Shadowclan is hurting us. Now, what did you want to say?"

"Nothing," Splitpaw whispered.

"That's what I thought. I will see you next Gathering, then."

"Yes, Glowstar."

...

"Starclan? It's... It's Splitpaw. I need your help. I think I know what Iceheart meant, with me being weighed down? I feel like I'm about to break. I hope this is all a part of my destiny, because otherwise I don't know if I can make it. So, please make this be what it needs to be... Okay, uh, thanks Starclan."

"Oh, and what do I do if I like three toms at the same time?"

Chapter 26- Bad Dreams

Heatherstar traveled silently through the forest, pausing only to glare without reason at the rest of the patrol ahead. Did Starclan really have to keep up the whole border patrol thing ? Sure, she used to be a kittypet, but even as she was chosen to be leader of Thunderclan, she had always thought border patrols were silly. But they ignored her.

Snakefang, the patrol leader, had a scowl dominating his features as he led the patrol of Thunderclan cats, more than she would ever be able to count, towards the giant clearing as big as the sky itself where they still held gatherings every once in a while when there was something important to discuss.

Flanked by her best friends, Silverleaf and Sunstrike, they made their way down long, winding paths that eventually intersected Riverclan's huge group of cats and they converged, blending into one thriving mass. Cloudmist, Woodsong, Flowriver, Creekwater, Waterfall, and even the grumpy old cat Streamblaze joined in. That was one thing that Heatherstar, even after being in Starclan for countless moons would never get used to: the clans were just names. They didn't fight, they didn't compete for food, relationships were allowed between clans; the newest generation of dead cats didn't even use their Clan titles anymore! It was all very confusing to her.

"Hey, did you hear what the Gathering is about?"

She didn't even bother trying to detect were the mew originated from in the smothering mass.

"Yea! Something about the cats down there being all mouse-brained and fighting over some cat!"

"What? What are we going to do to fix that?"

"I don't know! That's why we're all meeting, bird-brain!"

"I guess... what have you done with little Mistkit's attitude?"

Heatherstar refocused on one group of cats to the other, not really paying attention to any of them. All the new information she had found was the fact that it had been last-minute. Taking a deep breath, she swallowed and shivered against the cold breeze.

Okay, that was another thing she would never get used to: the weather was just as brutal, just as bottom-freezing, and just as annoyingly annoying as before, back when she was alive. Wasn't she supposed to have the freedom of always having it nice there?

Apparently no t . The breeze continued to blow as they left the path, swarming like a pack of rats towards where the other cats, thriving and talking and being so incredibly LOUD, had been waiting.

Like so many others, Heatherstar had been woken from her sleep, (that she annoyingly still needed) and had decided to go back to it along with a pawful of others. They all huddled together; a Riverclan snuggled up to a Shadowclan cat and so forth, until they were a huge mass of fur and slowly rising chests.

"NO!"

Her violent awakening left the whole mass disgruntled and grumpy, the clearing now empty and dusty where millions of pawsteps had already traversed back to their nests in the forest, pines, and river.

Spotting a tom, as old looking as... well... old could get, staring at the sky, empty of stars. Since they were the stars themselves... the skies above were just empty and black.

"E-Excuse me, what was the outcome of the Gathering?"

The old tom turned to look at her with sightless eyes.

"They claimed that the differences between Riverclan and Shadowclan was nothing a little battle couldn't solve. They've already sent a dream to the Riverclan leader, but she hasn't seemed to do anything besides stir up the pond. The Shadowclan leader is probably having hers right now."

No... this couldn't be! Not right after the dream she just had! If a Starclan cat got a dream like she just did... great... great Starclan. They were in trouble.

Chapter 27- An Ironic New Name

It was a stressful day. In fact, it had been a stressful moon. Splitpaw had struggled in silence for the answers to questions she knew just about as much as when she would die.

But, maybe the stress would kill her in the night.

Glowstar was the reason of constant sleep deprivation over the past moon. Questions that she didn't dare to ask anyone floated around in her head like the snowflakes that had begun to fall daily, giving the everyday grey sky a cold, uncaring atmosphere.

Splitpaw had just finished her final assessment when the snow began to fall again. For the first time that moon, she had felt confident. She knew she did well. She worked with each apprentice, Bonepaw, Moonpaw, Bravepaw, and Driftpaw each; she still felt the most comfortable with Moonpaw, and she prayed to Starclan that's who she ended up with for her Partner. There was still an issue though...

Splitpaw had been avoiding Glowstar's demand the whole moon. Tomorrow would be the Gathering.

She had been too scared to confess to anyone, not even Driftpaw. She still found it almost ironic how neither Bonepaw nor Moonpaw knew the internal struggle she was having.

Thinking about it, as she padded with Honeyflame, the deputy, back to camp after her hunting assessment with Bravepaw (which wasn't too painful), Bonepaw wouldn't have such as big of an opinion as Moonpaw. Bonepaw had confessed his love for Driftpaw two sunrises before and although Driftpaw had insisted that they would wait until they were warriors to make anything known, Splitpaw had to wonder what they did between the end of training and when they went to sleep.

"Well, enough about me and Bonepaw... who do you have the feelings for?!"

Driftpaw's question caught Splitpaw so off guard, she was now alternating between who she liked and what clan would claim her heart. It wasn't a tough decision for either of them, but for some reason not giving either proper thought seemed rushed. Like she was choosing one so the other would never come to light.

Thinking back on it, the question seemed so small and insignificant. She could easily see herself living happily ever after with Moonpaw, having kits (or not), and staying in Shadowclan.

But then, that little part of her that wouldn't let the other choice stand to the side, could clearly picture Rapidpaw and her fighting fiercely for Riverclan, and being happy together as much as they wished.

Kits... it still struck her as undesirable. Crystalfall, in fact, had kits right after the last Gathering. They were already huge, tumbling around and acting so crazy that she wondered if that was really how she was supposed to have acted as a kit?

The camp was full of hustle and bustle. The three warriors who didn't have Partners were as excited as the apprentices themselves to see if today was the day they would receive what was so important in Shadowclan.

Splitpaw was just ready to become a warrior.

It was almost unbelievable that it had been six moons since she had been a tiny, malnourished, weak kit with such twisted proportions about the world. Now she was... stronger. She wasn't sure if those opinions were totally fixed yet.

The snow, so regular, that her short-haired self became immune to the cold in which most other cats didn't have to worry about. Splitpaw really hated the winter.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the rock slope for a clan meeting!" Sharpstar's yowl rang around the

clearing. The cold air carried her voice farther than Splitpaw would've thought possible, scaring birds off of nearby trees, causing the air to become clouded with small swarms of crowing and squawking.

When the air was finally quiet again, she and the others had gathered in front of Sharpstar who was standing slightly above them on the slope. Looking down on them with her green eyes, she narrowed them onto her. Splitpaw knew that Sharpstar wasn't happy with her indecision on Glowstar's request, but she knew better than to interfere.

"Today is my favorite part about being a leader; today I reward these apprentices, who worked their hardest to become Shadowclan's next generation of strong, powerful warriors.

"Driftpaw," Sharpstar called, and the lithe grey she-cat stepped up excitedly to her paws as the rest of them stepped back.

"You have shown incredible progress since you have become an apprentice; Shadowclan is proud to welcome you with the name of Driftswipe."

Nodding, Driftswipe stepped back into line, grinning and purring as they congratulated her, yowling her name into the cold air.

"Bravepaw. You have been quite the talker, haven't you?" Sharpstar joked with a small smile as the cats who were gathered around chuckled. Bravepaw let out a nervous laugh.

"But, regardless, you are an exceptional hunter, and Shadowclan welcomes you as Braveglare."

After the congratulations was repeated, it was her turn. Her heart beat with anticipation.

"Splitpaw. You have had a very difficult kithood, but you have not let that hinder your ability to be your best. Shadowclan welcomes you with the name of Splitrain."

She ruefully smiled, sharing with Sharpstar, over the ironic name that she was innocently given.

She could settle for Splitrain.

"Moonpaw. You have become one of our strongest fighters. Shadowclan welcomes you as Moongaze."

"Bonepaw. You are one of our best trackers. You are welcomed into Shadowclan as Bonerun."

"Driftswipe! Braveglare! Splitrain! Moongaze! Bonerun!" the cats of Shadowclan called their names out to the setting sun that was just barely visible through the grey clouds of leaf-bare.

"Now, partnership is the biggest part about Shadowclan; it is the key to our success. We hunt together, fight together, work together, and care for each other. That is what makes us who we are. Now, I have discussed this with Honeyflame and all of the mentors involved, and here are your final Partners."

Sharpstar seemed to relish the few slow heartbeats of anticipation at her words to come.

"Bonerun and Moongaze, you will be Partners. Driftswipe and Splitrain, you will be paired together. Lastly, Braveglare and Darkpelt, you are now Partners. May Starclan bless you all."

The final congratulations flew up into the dark sky as they all escaped into the warmth of the dens. Splitrain, followed by an eager Driftswipe, padded over to the fresh-kill pile for a much needed meal after the assessments the day had held.

Driftswipe, huh? Not what she had been expecting, and from the grey warrior's eyes, neither was she. *Sharpstar made the pair because we work best together,* she reminded herself, but she couldn't help but to be slightly disappointed.

The rest of her waking moments she spent with the other warriors, joking about their names before they had to hold the vigil that night. They were all satisfied with their names, as far as Splitrain could tell, but the way Moongaze looked at her with remorse made her rethink that theory.

"Your name is beautiful," he whispered as he passed, not turning his

head as she opened her jaws to answer.

What, Splitrain wondered, would he think if she told him that she had been seeing Rapidpaw in secret?

Chapter 28- Come Back

Yes, Splitrain had been pretty mouse-brained to fall for Rapidpaw's... charmspeak. He had drawn her into following him to the border they shared and chatting until the sun was visible on the tips of the treetops. She had tried to stop, tried to tell him that she wanted to stop meeting him, but her attempts were half-hearted, and Rapidpaw knew it.

" Please, don't go, Splitpaw! It's just a meeting, and you're mostly Riverclan anyways... how much trouble could you get into? "

Well tonight she would end it, she thought as snow slowly collected on her still form; the night was determined to turn her to ice before she could see the sun as a warrior. Driftswipe beside her shivered, her huffs clouding in her face and making her breathe even more. Moongaze, the farthest away from Splitrain, was pawing the ground and growling as snow kept filling his naturally upturned ears.

The night was pitch black, the camp bleeding into shadows, so she couldn't see Sharpstar until she was right in front of them.

"It's unhealthy for you all to be out here in this weather. You can complete your vigil tomorrow night," she instructed, giving them a nod at their dumbstruck expressions and padding away back into the shadows.

Wait... what? Did Sharpstar really mean that? But that was breaking the Warrior Code! They couldn't end their vigil and take it up another night... could they? Thoughts of Rapidpaw leaked into her thoughts, how she could end things tonight so she could start the rest of her life without a secret hanging over her ears and weighting down her paws? She was determined to be the best she could be, and that couldn't be with a 'friend' from another clan. An enemy clan (to her), at any chance.

"Hey, Splitrain, let's go! We still have to make our nests and everything... ugh!" Driftswipe moaned and jumped around, trying to

shake off snow and dreading making nests in the cold snow. *Mouse-dung!*

"Uh... I have a belly-ache... sorry. I'll be in the Dirtplace for a while... just sleep in our apprentice nests for tonight."

Please, please... don't question me! Splitrain prayed.

"Okay... do you need Mintbreeze to take a look at you?"

Oh, thank Starclan! "Uh... I don't think so, I just have to stop eating so much, I think!"

"Okay! I hope you feel better! I'll see you in the morning!"

Nodding, Splitrain padded rather quickly to the Dirtplace, trying to hide her embarrassment. Wrinkling her nose at the offensive smells, she crept out the back and raced towards the Riverclan border, hoping that Rapidpaw hadn't given up and left.

Trees racing past her, Splitrain heard the all-too-familiar sounds of streams lazily trickling past ice and moss-covered rocks. *There!* Rapidpaw was standing out near the stream, lapping up water and shivering in the cold.

"Splitpaw?" he called out, all of her stress dissipating at his worried gaze.

"I-It's Splitrain, now," she whispered. The cold made her voice tremble, but he heard her loud and clear.

"Congratulations! Splitrain... that's a beautiful name!"

Her mind flashing back to Moongaze's identical compliment earlier, she nodded and looked away. She was scared about how he would react to what she had to tell him.

"So, um, Rapidpaw—"

He purred. "Nuh uh, you're not the only cat here that got their warrior name!" he grinned at her stunned expression.

"You may address me as Rapidflame."

Splitrain mocked a bow, "How long until your name is Rapidstar, then?"

He grinned, "Not long, if I can help it! Oh! I have something to ask you!"

"Uh, so do I," she muttered.

"Me first, me first! Okay, so..." Rapidflame's eyes narrowed and he stood up in front of her with a serious expression.

"Will you be my mate? Come back to Riverclan, Splitrain, I need you."

Chapter 29- Something to Tell You

"Don't worry though," he whispered with a smile. "Take as much time as you would like to decide. So, what were you going to ask me?"

The cold. The full moon shining overhead, a mere whisker's length too short to be the Gathering's signal. The stars, twinkling, staring down at her and expecting an answer as vividly as Rapidflame. It was all too much. Was she really supposed to say what she had been planning to? After he had just asked her to be his mate?

Was it?

"Splitrain?"

Rapidflame covered the paw steps between them and pressed his warm pelt against her own.

"Are you cold?"

Splitrain took a deep breath and expelled the thoughts buzzing around in her head like gnats in greenleaf.

"Yes, I'm fine, it's just... never mind!" she winced at the horrible sound of her voice cracking as she tried to sound enthusiastic, "I mean... I was just going to tell you about this huge rabbit that wandered from Windclan and straight into my paws! Look... I have to go, before I'm missed. I'll see you at the Gathering tomorrow."

Rapidflame, although worried at her confession outburst, nodded and licked her ears affectionately, "I'll see you then, Splitrain."

With a half-hearted smile that she hoped he took as reassuring smirk, she ran almost twice as fast back to the camp. She needed a plan.

And she knew exactly who she would go to.

...

"Splitrain? What's the matter?" Honeyflame held back a yawn as she questioned her.

"It's important that I talk to Sharpstar, right now."

She sighed, "Can this not be postponed until the morning?"

"No, Honeyflame, it can't wait."

The tired deputy gave a reluctant nod and led Splitrain into the leader's den.

It had been over six moons since she had last been in this den; the earthy smell of the black stones and the huge green leaves, sheltered from being browned and curled, still held unintelligible scribbles and shapes. *What was Sharpstar doing with all of these things?*

The said russet leader was hunched over the leaves, forehead furrowed and tail lashing irritably.

"Sharpstar, Splitrain wishes to speak to you right away. She says it cannot wait."

The leader of Shadowclan turned her attention from the leaves to Splitrain.

"What do you need?"

Suddenly, Splitrain couldn't speak. Where had her resolve gone? Her defiance? Her courage?

She felt as if the fate of Starclan weighed upon her shoulder blades. It made her mouth unable to open, to explain the inevitable. The obvious. The destined.

Chapter 30- I Have a Plan

Jaws were locked with unspoken words of confession. Why had she gone over here, again? Could she not have waited until the morning? She didn't know how to start explaining.

"Splitrain? Is something the matter?" Sharpstar's concerned mew shook Splitrain's courage. What was she going to do?

Just tell the truth, mouse-brain, a voice in her head muttered, *and tell her about your plan.*

Splitrain set her shoulders, narrowed her eyes, and took a deep breath.

"I have a plan, on how we can ambush Riverclan."

The russet Shadowclan leader tensed. She saw Sharpstar's claws slide out of their sheathes just slightly.

"What do you mean, Splitrain? A plan? What nonsense are you speaking?"

"I know Riverclan has pushed us around; all of the Clans know how they've been sniffing around everyone's borders. They have been stealing prey from us, but I know without proof you are too wise to accuse. Well, Glowstar has invited me back to Riverclan. She expects an answer tomorrow night at the Gathering. We can use this to our advantage! Maybe there is no need to attack right now, but you, I, and every other cat knows that in this lifetime there will be a battle. What better way to be prepared than to..."

She drifted off, knowing Sharpstar knew what she was going to finish with.

Chest heaving from the quiet excitement bubbling in her chest, Splitrain waited in a tangible silence. She could see the thoughts as they entered Sharpstar's mind, the leader looking thoughtful with a

dark glint in her eye.

The very thought of her plan a moon ago would've been scoffed at immediately by Splitrain, and even now, knowing this idea came from her head, disturbed her the slightest bit.

I'm doing as a warrior should. I'm taking advantage and using the chances around me, and making sure my clan ends out on top. The Warrior Code has nothing against this, and neither do I.

Sharpstar looked at the leaves lying around the den. She pawed them closer, and beckoned Splitrain over.

"These are paw leaves. The black rock is a mark. I use these for battle strategy and planning. Can I ask you this: what will your plan accomplish? I know what you're thinking, but how will this help?"

The stars, still hovering in a cloudless night sky, seemed to peer into the den, peeking to see what might happen in the depths of these two cat's minds. What plan they were making, and if it would unravel the future as much as they were sure it would.

...

Paw steps silent, breath clouding the air above them, the light of a full moon glaring frigidly down on the small pack of cats huddled around each other behind the shadow of a huge oak. Stars glitter down distantly, and a little ways away countless cats speak and share tongues, completely unaware.

Hunched backs against the wind, the small groups whisper heatedly and hiss. But eventually this, too, falls silent. There is an agreement. Three leaders bow their heads and wish luck to a small warrior.

Parting their separate ways, each calls a loud yowl into the cold night. Four groups of cats quiet down. Tails wrapped around paws, they each declare one piece of news or another. The third one speaks to the fourth loudly, for every cat to hear.

Several gasps from one group, along with a couple of hisses. Another group exchanges a series of smirks and dark, conceited chuckles. Two others look around them, confused.

From the gasping crowd, one cat steps forward and bows her head to the four up in the trees. Grumbles are heard throughout the clearing, some angry yowls calling out offensive names to this particular cat, as she leaves the group and becomes swallowed by the other.

Scandalous looks are shared. Whispers arise, but upon the trees, three stay stoic, one gleeful. Three secretly dreading what is to come, one partially surprised.

The groups disband. One has to drag away a couple who are yowling angrily at the cat who had joined the other group. A tom and a she-cat. The tom is broken, the she-cat hurt; both furious. Two more toms stand nearby, looking lost.

The she-cat that is now surrounded by cats smelling of fish and reeds takes the angry glares and remarks to heart with a mask of indifference. Her eyes are hurt, but she masks the eyes brimming with unshed, uncertain tears behind a cloud of cold breath that the weather creates. She backs away slowly, and fights the urge to yowl to the sky.

A grey tom places a tail over her back, guiding her forward, and sends a frosty look at all other cats. They create a small circle around them, and follow a stream into the darkness.

That night, on that Gathering, Starclan itself was split in two. Half wanted to do one thing. Others another. Both were right and wrong. The past was in stone, but the future, after this night, was sure to change more times than any could count.

Only three smiles emerged that night from the cold. One hateful, one excited, and one was certainly

Not.

Good.

Chapter 31- Let Me Think About It

Memories resurfaced. A lot of them.

Rapidflame had taken her to Riverclan camp— her home, once again. The path was familiar, even though she had been just barely an apprentice when she had traveled it, and the camp was almost painfully unchanged. There were several new warriors, cats, and elders alike; Splitrain didn't know any of them well enough to greet, and even if she did, she probably wouldn't have.

Not to her surprise, cats still shied away from her — or flinched — at first glance. A golden apprentice, new since she had called this clan her's, had actually jumped, frightened. Even though he apologized profusely afterwards, he still was wary as he followed behind to hear news from the Gathering.

Nothing was said about her returning besides, *we'll give you tomorrow to get... re-situated,* from Dryriver, the deputy. He was a pale tan, with bland eyes and an even blander personality, from what she could gather.

It still struck her how much the camp, cats, and territory hadn't changed. Dens, the little clearing where apprentices trained, the atmosphere... it was all startling; that was, until she had grabbed a fish from the pile.

The smell repulsed her. The sight made her sick to the stomach. Had the fish in her mouth always tasted so... bitter? So slimy in her mouth, almost as if it was trying to come back to life as it slid down her throat?

"I-I'm going to go explore the territory," she excused herself, pushing the fish that she had been sharing with Rapidflame towards his paws and heaved herself to sore paws. The grey blue tom looked up at her, squinting at the sun behind her back.

"Are you okay? Can I come too?"

The way he said it left no room for question; he was stating that he was going with her. She didn't really mind, she just needed to gather what Sharpstar required, then she would go back home. *Home*. Shadowclan was her home. Not Riverclan.

Rapidflame leading the way, they left the clearing crowded with morning tongue-sharing and the glances at her face. The sun was high up now, but it offered no warmth from the bitter winds blowing through the reeds. In Shadowclan the trees had always provided protection from the harsh blows of cold, but Riverclan had nothing but low-rising reeds and a couple of leafless willows.

The brush underpaw made her feel loud and clumsy. The little pebbles and sand tumbled from her pawsteps and made the worst clinking sound as they rolled to the river on their right a few tail lengths below. The nettles that littered the pine forest floor in Shadowclan masked any sound, mandatory for stalking squirrels and birds. Riverclan needed none of this; fish could not hear, or were too stupid to.

Splitrain silently mourned the fact that she would not eat another mouse, thrush, squirrel, or anything relatively warm for a while. Her tongue cringed at the thought of fish three times a day, every day.

Upon coming to the Sunning Rocks — which were currently in Riverclan's possession to Thunderclan's disappointment — Rapidflame turned around with a teasing smirk.

"You ready to be Riverclan again? No filthy Shadowclan cat can rest on the Sunning Rocks!"

Eye twitching, Splitrain had to concentrate hard on Sharpstar and the other leaders' advice that had been given to her last night. *Try and act as if you wanted to go back to Riverclan the whole time; act as if you hate them,* as the Thunderclan leader had put it.

"Oh, you have no idea how much! Shadowclan never even saw the sun!"

"Hah! No wonder your pelt is so scruffy! It's like the complete opposite of mine!"

"Hey, excuse me?" starting to get into her rhythm of effortless lies, she started to enjoy herself a little bit. Sharpstar didn't expect her to work the first day back, did she?

"Get back here, or else I'll cut your pretty little face! It's been so long since I've felt fur in my claws... Shadowclan doesn't let you fight at all! Let me sharpen up my skills — on you!"

"Only if you can catch me!" with that, Rapidflame scampered off down the riverbank, kicking up stones as she chased after him.

Several minutes had passed when she felt her head throbbing. The sides of the bank were shining in the corners of her vision, and it was affecting her in the worst way.

Slowing down, Splitrain studied the sparkling material inside the rock. It shook her after a moment of confusion: it was the same material that had appeared in her nest after a scary night — the shiny things.

Rapidflame, having heard her give up, came back and peered over her shoulder.

"Oh, you don't know what that stuff is? It's called mica or something like that. I used to leave it for you in your nest, remember?"

A shaky nod is the answer he got. Her mind was whirring like a bee's wings. This was her chance!

"Hey, do you think we'll attack Shadowclan any time soon? I really want to... you know, claw some of them."

Rapidflame shot her a scheming, lazy grin.

"I don't know, it's pretty difficult to plan an attack when we don't know what their territory is like... would you happen to know anyone who does? Now that — that would be helpful. Do you know such a cat?"

She forced down the sick feeling of talking about attacking Shadowclan and forced a purr through.

"Maybe, let me think about it."

Chapter 32- First Fight

Let me think about it.

Starclan, she was such a mouse-brain. She would think about it?! Aggghh! What was she going to do?! Rapidflame stared at her a moment more, head cocked to the side, and opened his mouth as if to say something when the reeds parted. A cat that she couldn't name was in front of them in a heartbeat, his golden tail erect and eyes wide. His chest was heaving and he struggled to speak. Rapidflame rushed over and seemed to catch the wheezy mew that the cat released before collapsing.

"Is he okay?" she asked worriedly. Rapidflame just flicked his tail.

"We have more urgent things to worry about. Eaglestrike says that there is a battle skirmish on our border with Shadowclan."

He had been about to head that way when he seemed to remember her situation.

"Well, here's your chance to claw up some Shadowclannies. I'll have them quivering behind their little pine trees and you can finish them off, 'kay?"

Splitrain felt chills run down her spine. She was chilled to the bone, but it wasn't the cold. Could she really do this? Did Sharpstar notify anyone of her task, or did she keep them in the dark so their reactions would be more believable? In that case, she would be against real teeth and claws. No pulled swipes, and no sheathed claws.

With a jolt, she realized this would be her first real fight. Sure, she had done plenty of practice as a 'paw, but this was real. There was a possibility of death. She felt excitement despite the current situation. She would get to put her teachings to work!

Only it was against cats she cared about.

She addressed Rapidflame, "I'm right behind you."

She tried to gather her courage as she pounded through the seemingly endless reeds, following Rapidflame's grey tail as he expertly weaved through the tall growth. Excitement was flowing through her, mixing with the cold feeling of dread that made the upcoming fight seem okay. So what if she just practiced a bit? Even if it was just a border skirmish, she could say she had actually fought.

Her nose picked up the tell-tale pines and she felt a twinge of longing. Oh, how she missed those trees! Where in Starclan did Riverclan sharpen their claws? The yowling took her back from her thoughts as her and Rapidflame passed the last of the reeds and they stopped abruptly. The ground below was thriving with spitting, hissing, and screeching. Rapidflame did not hesitate to pounce into the mass with a roar and narrowed eyes.

Was this really what a fight looked like? There were twice as many cats as she thought there would be — at least as many as her claws. Even from countless tail-lengths away and below them, on top of the small hill she was taken aback.

Rapidflame was batting unsheathed paws full of anger at Driftswipe, she realized with a pang of guilt. The grey she-cat was the only one without a cat at her back to protect her as the gold tabby tom that had alerted them pounced on her from behind, latching onto her hindquarters and taking her to the ground.

Not thinking clearly, she leapt down from her perch of horror with the intent of just doing something — she couldn't think clearly. Her head was pounding; vision was melding with the excitement that coursed through her body, making the appeal of just sliding her claws out a bit not that bad, right?

She settled her eyes on Blackrose, the black she-cat that had always gotten on her nerves slightly. Might as well prove to Rapidflame and the other Riverclan cats that she was on their side, by attacking her? It seems okay to her. She wouldn't fatally wound the cat, of course, but she was sure that a little bit of claws-on-claws wouldn't hurt anyone — too badly, that is.

Trying to keep all of the fighting moves she had learned over the past six moons in her head she pounced on her from behind, eyes making everything tinted red in her excitement. Too late, Splitrain realized two things:

One, she didn't have a Partner. Almost every move she knew was using a Partner, and the ones that didn't require were not offensive. Strictly defensive. The moves were for escape, or stalling until the said Partner could save them.

Two, Blackrose had one. And she was mad.

Oakcloud was a blur as he streaked from chasing a Riverclan tom, all laid back ears and bristled fur. He and Blackrose went to the automatic side-by-side, and a small spark of hope came to life. She had studied fighting techniques enough to know what they were about to do. Oakcloud was going to sprint away to take her by the side while Blackrose occupied her attention with annoying cuffs to her ears that were made to confuse her to the real threat: Oakcloud's unsheathed claws going straight for her flank; or her chest and throat.

Glittering eyes were met by Splitrain's defiant gaze. She was at the disadvantage, but she wasn't hopeless.

Oakcloud, already running at her left flank, distracted her from the first cuff to her muzzle. She felt the warm, sticky trickle begin almost immediately as Blackrose hissed, teeth bared, and reared back her paw for another rough hit. She could guess she only had seconds before claws tore into her flank and she should escape. She gathered her haunches and leapt just half a heartbeat too late; Oakcloud's claws left shallow wounds that hurt nonetheless and Blackrose hooked her exposed belly when she was jumping.

Wincing as she landed, jolting her hind legs, she cursed to Starclan. If only she could separate them, then she could let her natural instincts take over! She was sure that despite bleeding from multiple wounds, although none were close to fatal, she couldn't take both of them at once. She growled in frustration as she turned to face them once more. Maybe if she could—

She is suddenly pressed against the ground by a mass of greyish blue fur. Amber eyes meet hers, and above that the cold grey rock under the small overhangs that marked the border between the two clans.

Moongaze.

Her chest ached to nuzzle him, apologize, to make the wrong okay. He had other ideas, though.

"You seem to be having too much fun with your job, silly Splitrain."

Chapter 33- Of Course

Teeth were a whisker-length away from her throat. Everything was silent for several heartbeats while she digested Moongaze's hiss.

"I—"

"I suggest you stay in character, or else you'll never come home. That Riverclan tom is watching you," came his growl, as he flipped both of them over. A mixture of confusion at the undercurrent of jealousy in his tone and the fact that Rapidflame was watching her fueled the launch of her hind legs to send the bluish grey warrior several tail-lengths away. Just overhead she saw a small nook; if they could disappear behind it, they would have a few free moments.

Splitrain swiped at his muzzle, forcing him back to avoid her claws that were just barely unsheathed. Moongaze seemed to catch on, and allowed himself to be herded back into the space.

When Splitrain peeked behind her to see if they were fully covered, she received a harsh blow to her side. Eyes wide with shock, she stared at Moongaze's hurt expression.

"Did you not think I cared about you? How you leaving would make me feel?"

Indignation flared up inside of her. "It's my duty as a Shadowclan warrior to both follow my leader's advice and my own heart. This could make us the most powerful clan in the forest! Don't you understand that, Moongaze?"

The fight seemed to leave his body as he digested her words, and Splitrain took the chance to self-consciously check her mouth, finding the tang of warm blood on her tongue.

His eyes were filled with a desperate passion, "Power would mean nothing to me if something were to happen to you. And something

will happen, with you being a sitting duck for someone to discover! Do you know how you would be punished, Splitrain? Death! And I could do nothing about it... you have no idea how that would destroy me."

Peeking around the nook they were in, she caught Rapidflame searching for her. Time was almost up.

"Moongaze... I have to go before someone becomes suspicious. Is there anywhere I can meet you?"

Looking down, ears flat, he perked up when she mentioned meeting him. "Actually, that's what Sharpstar wanted this whole skirmish to be about. She wants you to go to the edge of Shadowclan's territory before the Fourtrees path begins. Tonight. I'm sure I can convince her to let me tag along—"

"Splitrain?"

Time was up.

With an apologetic glance at Moongaze, she hissed in false pain and tackled him to the dusty ground, making sure they slid into view of Rapidflame's worried mew. Seeing relief in the Riverclan tom's eyes was relieving, but she hadn't planned on one thing.

With a triumphant yowl, the thick muscled tom joined her in her half grip on Moongaze. Mousedung! She couldn't let Moongaze get hurt...

Letting Rapidflame batter him for another heartbeat, she hooked deft claws in behind his hind legs, making his slide to the ground. Standing over him, she nipped his ear and whispered for him to run. She could see the reluctance to retreat, but this was for both of them. Splitrain needed to know that he wouldn't get hurt.

With one more feeble swipe to his ears, he pounded out from the overhang and out towards the pines, where the other Shadowclan cats were retreating.

After watching them retreat with hawk eyes, Rapidflame turned to her with a worried glance. "You're bleeding."

Almost in shock, she looked down to where her belly was stained red with blood, and her flank, which was redder than white and brown. Faintly she remembered someone saying how excitement over a fight made pain fade. A throbbing sensation ripped its way into her head and behind her eyes.

"It's nothing," she mumbled, wincing as she tried to bend down to start cleaning the wound, but Rapidflame would have none of it.

"Don't you dare move, Splitrain. I'll grab another warrior; you're bleeding out.

A protest built in her chest, but nothing would leave her numb mouth. Had Blackrose and Oakcloud really done that much damage to her? So much for her first fight ending smoothly... she fell into a pit of despair. How could she save Shadowclan from the impending attack from Riverclan, spy successfully, and balance feelings for two different cats if she couldn't even handle a simple border skirmish? And even that wasn't real; as Moongaze had said, it was a way for Sharpstar to get a message to her.

Behind a cloud of increasing pain and misery, she felt herself moan and whine as she was picked up, jostling her sensitive wounds and making her vision blacken.

Another moment and she was in the medicine den. An immediate threat, considering her past in the herb-smelling hole. Then she felt a warm pelt beside hers, and she looked up to see Rapidflame. He blinked his greeting to her, and bent down to lick between her eyes.

"Go back to sleep, Splitrain, you're fine. The wounds aren't too deep. You're safe."

Not questioning his soft but firm order, another bit of restless sleep overcame her.

For the second time she woke up, she was alone. The sounds of a leaf-bare night were filling the air, and it would've been peaceful if she hadn't been able to see the moon, half full, already almost at it's highest point in the sky. For a moment she just stared at it, knowing it meant something, but she couldn't remember what.

Then, with a start, she got up, hissing at the way her wounds bit into her mind and the poultice caked on her flank and belly seeped into her cuts, unleashing a new volley of pain.

Releasing a deep breath, Splitrain watched in fascination as it clouded in front of her for a moment before dissipating, and she began the long trek to the Fourtrees path.

Chapter 34- You're Done

It was a bad idea. A very, very bad idea. Splitrain was cringing on the inside. Starclan, no! Here she is, freezing her romp off under the Fourtrees with Sharpstar. All is well as she explains every detail of how her days had been with Riverclan. The russet pelted leader asked for entrances, patrol times. How many warriors, what was the time when they were all asleep?

And then the leader drops the news.

"Splitrain, with the valuable information you have given Shadowclan, we can wage war before the next Gathering. Your spying has come to a close. You can escape in the next two or three sunrises, I'll post warriors along the shared border. I'm proud of you for your abilities to gather the facts."

Already? Done? No more lying to cats, no more secrets? She couldn't believe it. Could she?

Sharpstar winked her eye at Splitrain. "Besides, Moongaze is practically clawing at the entrance because I wouldn't let him go. He really misses you."

Cold leaf-bare air filled her stinging nose as she took a deep breath. The wounds on her body protested, but she got up and paced, trying to stay warm. Sharpstar sat regal and still with her tail wrapped around her paws.

"I apologize about Blackrose and Oakcloud," the Shadowclan leader started, "They were not informed about your current... job, as neither was the rest of the clan. I only told Moongaze because he looked about ready to jump into a monster's path!"

Rolling her shoulders uncomfortably at the mention of the grey furred warrior's distress, Splitrain continued to pace around the leader.

"Anything else?" she snapped, trying not to sound as stressed as she actually was. Not that she wasn't elated to go back to Shadowclan, but escaping without getting killed was really bothering her.

"A couple of kits ready to become 'paws, but that's about it," Sharpstar said, a sly look in her eyes as Splitrain whirled, determined.

She would make sure that she got compensation for her hard work. There were three little kits, Blackrose's bunch, actually: Pinekit, Seedkit, and Coldkit. Splitrain didn't know much about them because they were the kind to stay inside their warm den as the days grew colder, and before this moment she hadn't really given much thought to an apprentice. But now...

"I want one of them to become my apprentice. I don't mind which."

"Why, of course," came the leader's slow reply.

Sharpstar's amber eyes seemed to follow Splitrain all the way back to Riverclan's camp.

...

The medicine den was still dark, the sun just yet to rise. The camp was quiet, and Splitrain refused the dark images of a night like this being shattered; Shadowclan warriors leaping out from all sides, ripping from the reeds and tall grasses. Blood soaking the ground. Cats shrieking in terror and fury. And knowing any death, if not her own, would have been because of her and her choices.

She rested pitifully for a while before Rapidflame came in, eyes as bright as she had ever seen them. He waited with a barely contained excitement as her wounds were redressed with webbing and the proper herbs, before practically yowling in her ear:

"You're looking at Riverclan's new deputy!"

Shocked, she sputtered something about the current deputy before being interrupted.

"He was old, and Glowstar's not gonna die anytime soon. She needs

a newer, younger cat to take her place. I cant wait until I can see my 'paw! He'll be so excited, knowing his final moons of training will be with the deputy!"

Off in search for his apprentice with a warm goodbye lick to the ears, he was gone, and Splitrain knew today was the day she could be leaving. Any longer and... well... nothing could really get worse, but definitely not better. How she was going to get away from all the cats in this bustling clearing and slip through either the entrance or from the thorn bushes in the dirtplace?

Either way, by dark Splitrain would be with Shadowclan once more.

Chapter 35- Almost Home

A cool, comforting breeze flowed along Splitrain's shoulders, ruffling her soft fur and raising a shiver. Against Glowstar's wishes she had joined a hunting patrol, and had innocently suggested the river that made part of their border with Shadowclan. A blue, cloudless sky was the opposite of foreboding as she made her way with, of all the cats in Riverclan: Iceheart, Strongsoul, and Skyheart.

Of all the luck! The three most influential cats she knew in Riverclan, right there next to her as they traversed to the fast-flowing stream. The tension was palpable, and Iceheart's whiskers twitched. In a moment, Splitrain was sucked up into her dream that she had so long ago.

Splitpaw had met him the day she opened her eyes to the world, and he was the one who made the puddle, that made her see what she was.

"First off, I called you Splitpath, not Splitface. Second, you are that great oak. You will be something great, respected, powerful... if you are not crushed first."

"Crushed? What do you mean?"

Iceheart gestured to the tree that was supposed to be her.

The oak was almost bent in half. Lichen, moss, ferns... everything that was usually on the forest floor was on this tree, and it was killing it.

Suddenly, as if triggered by her thoughts, the trunk snapped so loud that Splitpaw winced. She watched as the elegant, beautiful tree falls to the ground.

When it hits, her chest explodes into pain. She groans, and kneels to the ground. She can see stars.

She is taking deep breaths, trying to focus on anything besides the pain, when Iceheart comes over to her. Upon his touch, the pain disappears.

She frowns and turns around to give him reluctant thanks.

He is gone, in his place an enormous puddle.

She didn't have to look, did she?

She took a deep breath, and bent her head over the edge.

She does not see herself.

Instead, she sees three toms. The first two she easily recognizes as Bonepaw and Moonpaw. The third, a silver-blue, blinks back at her confused stare with a kind light. It seems as though Bonepaw and Moonpaw can't see her. They are just looking straight ahead.

Since then, so much more had made sense. Sure, maybe she didn't know why Bonepaw had been in her dream, or what Dream-Iceheart had meant when he compared her to the giant oak tree, but she did know the other tom in the puddle had been Rapidflame. And she did know that things got better. That undergrowth was on the ground; where it needed to be.

Her father took Splitrain out of her thoughts.

"I will take the area around the stepping stones with Iceheart, so Skyheart, take Rai—Splitrain and cover that area over there," Strongsoul instructed, gesturing with his ginger tail.

Uncomfortable was an understatement as she and her mother padded over to the space that they had been assigned to. Making sure their shadows were not over the water, side by side they waited silently, tails wrapped around their paws and two pairs of eyes, one grass green and the other blue and a darker shade of the mother's.

As the clear water trickled and sang along the tiny stones that populated thin bend of river, Splitrain couldn't help but notice the smell of pines just three tail-lengths away. The thick scent coated her tongue and sent happy thoughts of longing through her.

She shot Skyheart a sideways glance, analyzing every move that the soft ginger she-cat made. Her eyes were focused on the water,

flickering up and down looking for the tell-tale sign of silver that signaled a fish. The smallest chunks of ice flowed along with the occasional tree branch or leaf.

Next, Splitrain studied the gap between her and home. About three tail-lengths and a couple more of sand, then... freedom. She could almost taste it.

Lost in the plan that was forming in her head, at first she didn't notice the eyes inside the trees.

Flickers beyond the trees brought her attention to the ten pairs of eyes that waited.

Sharpstar had been true to her word; she had half the clan ready to help with her escape.

At the head, with his eyes the brightest, was Moongaze. He nodded, gesturing with his tail to the cats still shadowed within Shadowclan's recesses. Whatever her plan, she had all of their support.

Another glance to her mother, and she gathered her haunches. A great leap and she would be protected by her clan.

"Leaving so soon, honey?"

Pure ice filled her chest as she turned to her mother. A glare that could kill filled her face as she growled, lips pulled back to reveal sharp teeth.

Hair rose along her shoulders and spine as she returned the look. This cat was not her mother. This cat was never her mother. Sharpstar, in her opinion, held that title.

If her *mother* wanted a fight, a fight she would get.

Chapter 36- Not Supposed to Exist

Splitrain spared only one heartbeat of consideration before leaping at her mother, claws glinting. The space between them gave Skyheart just enough to show her teeth and let a low growl loose before her teeth were sunk into her mother's shoulder. The ginger tabby tried to shake her off as Splitrain's forepaws went in search of her face and ears, but was unsuccessful.

Strangely, Splitrain felt little anger affecting her movements and thoughts. Cold determination replaced her expected emotions, and made each slash and jab so much clearer. No red haze covered important details. She felt... powerful.

Finally tearing away from her hold, her mother created space between them to plan her next attack and to study her torn shoulder, bits of fur hanging off of the would be weeping blood. A moment later Skyheart leapt, aiming for Splitrain's hind legs. Coming from the side, her mother had the chance to land a stinging and partially crippling would. Considering that Splitrain was already nursing half-healed wounds, she was twice as vulnerable.

Ears folding back and an open-mouthed hiss on her face, she tried to stall, hoping that Shadowclan would come to her aid, and also that her father and Rapidflame were still unaware.

"Why could you never love me?"

Mouse dung, Splitrain hissed in her head, *why did my voice have to break?*

Green eyes filled with hate met hers. "Because you were never supposed to exist! You're my punishment for falling in love with a cat from another clan!"

Though her mother had not made a move towards her, the words

spoken stung her chest.

"So... Strongsoul's not... my father?"

Skyheart snorted. "No, Strongsoul is indeed your father. That is why you are not supposed to be here! I did not love him. I still don't. I became his mate so I wouldn't raise suspicion. But Riverclan still doubted me! They still didn't think I was telling the truth! So I had you, so they would finally trust me."

Splitrain opened her mouth, but no words came out. Her mother wasn't finished.

"And that's why I have to kill you now."

...

Moongaze's POV

That morning, Sharpstar had told him to get Splitrain back.

By any means necessary.

Of course, he didn't actually think he would have to get her by any means necessary, but hey, if he got to tear up mister Riverclan over there giving his Splitrain kit-eyes, then he wouldn't complain too much.

Wait, his Splitrain?

Okay, not his Splitrain.

Not yet, anyways, the tiny voice in the back of his head mewed happily. Hopefully.

Yeah, okay. So anyways, here he was, both figuratively and literally pacing the nettles on the ground with a deep growl under his breath.

The other toms on his rescue patrol were too scared to go near him after he accidently swiped at Brokenmask in his irritation and surprise.

"I remember when I was like that with Honeyflame," Lightfeather whispered to Coalfoot with an amused purr.

"Well, if Moongaze is anything like you used to be, then we have yet to see the worst of his... protective side," she muttered, only partially kidding.

Moongaze's eyes twitched.

Splitrain had begun to tense up, her mother rearing back, and it took all of his self-control and then some to hold his paws from pulling him over the border and making her mother pay.

"Crystalfall," he whined, begging the leader of the patrol for some sign that he could sink his claws into something other than dirt.

The white she-cat flicked her tail, thinking. "You may go, but no fighting unless in defense. Get Splitrain and come straight... back," she muttered her last word, watching him as he already sped across the rank border and pounded into the shallowest part of the river he could find.

Finally, he was able to see her again. Heat and anger rose up in his chest and threatened to haze his judgment as he studied her poultice-covered wounds, and newer ones by the ginger cat staring at him in shock.

That cat was lucky that Crystalfall said no fighting.

"Splitrain," he said slowly, trying to keep the growl out of his voice, "Let's go."

Her mottled ginger and black legs shook as she lifted her body off the ground and leaned heavily on his shoulder. Not that he was complaining about that, but the ginger she-cat was making him nervous. She just... sat there.

Overall, very un-warrior-like.

Nursing a tired and weak Splitrain across the river, shallow or not, was not fun. Or easy.

Definitely not easy.

But, the little voice in his head piped in, *she's home.*

Where she belonged, with him.

Chapter 37- Do They Really Know?

The sharp scent of mint wafted around Splitrain and woke her from her slumber. All was quiet in the medicine den, Mintbreeze being asleep in the farthest corner from her with a curtain of moss separating them. She was the only one being taken care of right now, but after her six days of confinement to ensure no infection would ensue from her half-healed wounds and the newest scars on her muzzle and hind legs from her mother.

The grumpy tortoiseshell tom informed that Splitrain would be allowed back in the warrior's den tomorrow she reminded herself, trying to escape the stuffy air in the den. The star sprinkled sky outside revealed the constellations of her ancestors, but she did not feel close to them. They were spectators watching a show.

"Hey, you want to go for a walk?"

The whisper shocked Splitrain out of her mulling, and she spun around to meet the voice.

Driftswipe stood before her, slightly taller and a good bit stronger-looking. A kind smirk was on her face, the dull almost-full moon drawing any color from her pelt and leaving her in a statue of greys and blacks. With an affirmative nod, Splitrain followed her Partner through the entrance with a nod to a frost-covered Coalfoot.

"You two be careful," Coalfoot warned, "And try to bring back some prey while you are out!"

Flicking their tails to let the black she-cat know they heard her, Driftswipe directed them towards the border they shared with Windclan.

Almost in accordance with the cold, quiet atmosphere, the forest seemed to be asleep. No breeze stirred the pines, and the

underbrush provided deep, still shadows on the soft, nettle-covered ground.

Feeling her shoulders relax, her paws rejoice on being back on her home soil, she was calm for the first time in quite a while.

Driftswipe's tail waved lazily ahead of her as they neared their border, and the she-cat slowed to a halt.

"So," she started, head faced straight ahead but glancing at Splitrain from the corner of her eyes. She seemed to be prompting Splitrain to speak.

And speak she did. With little encouragement she explained everything to her Partner, excluding the parts about Rapidflame. The comfort that Driftswipe provided at the right moments reminded Splitrain just how lucky she was. She had a Partner who cared for her, a home that welcomed her without judgment, plenty of prey despite the brutal leaf-bare, and a tom who seemed to want nothing but the best for her.

After finishing her tale, the grey she-cat was pressed close to her own calico pelt for warmth, eyes wide with her unasked questions.

"So, what now? I mean, you spied on another clan, and risked your life to get information for a battle that we may not even win. Riverclan will want your heart on the earth, you know that, right? You'll have to always be careful... especially at this Gathering coming up! Riverclan will literally propose that you should be killed!"

To this, Splitrain had no answer, because these were things she herself had been asking.

"I don't know, Driftswipe. I really don't. I'm just happy I'm home again."

Her Partner fell silent, but only for a moment. "Do you think Sharpstar will give you one of the kits? I heard that their apprentice ceremony is at sunrise—" Driftswipe broke off, glancing up through the needles to see the first signs of light breaking over the horizon.

"Well, let's go and find out! It's about time Bonerun got something to focus on! He's been driving himself crazy with nothing big going on!" her Partner exclaimed.

All of a sudden, Driftswipe stopped and grinned at her, "I can't believe I almost forgot! Splitrain... I'm expecting Bonerun's kits!"

A rush of warmth and affection coursed through her with affection for her Partner and best friend; she was genuinely happy for Driftswipe, and it also meant more future warriors for Shadowclan.

"That's amazing! This greenleaf will be a happy one, I see!"

"Mmmhmm!" came from Driftswipe as she ran up ahead to greet Bonerun. Splitrain nodded congratulation to the white and black tom. Pushing her way through the bracken she was greeted with Blackrose grooming her kits, Pinekit, Seedkit, and Coldkit to perfection.

"Mom, if you lick me anymore the sun will reflect off my pelt," Pinekit grumbled, his dark brown pelt indeed gleaming in the early morning sun. The white in his pelt ran in stripes along his lower back, and he had a line going down between his grey eyes.

"Lighten up, Pinekit! Today we become apprentices," his sister, Coldkit, reminded, practically jumping with excitement. Her pure white pelt was quite the shocker, against the dark browns and blacks that Shadowclan called home. The she-kit's pale blue eyes hinted at playfulness and joy.

The last kit, Seedkit, was quiet. His tan, fluffy pelt was groomed, but he licked his paw and continuously patted down the little fluff of hair that insisted on hanging over his amber eyes.

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the rock slope for a clan meeting!"

The familiar tone of Shadowclan's leader carried through the clearing as cats came out of their dens to gather around the slope. Sharpstar's russet pelt was also groomed and lying flat despite the cool wind that was blowing.

Splitrain made her way to Moongaze, giving him a flick to his ears as she sat and pressed her shoulder against his.

"Do you think Sharpstar will give one of the kits the honor of having you as their mentor?" Moongaze joked, pressing back.

Remembering the conversation she had with the leader, she nodded, "I think the odds are in my favor."

"Cats of Shadowclan, today as a leader I get to do one of my favorite things: bestowing kits their apprentice names and starting their training as warriors. But, there is one exception. Seedkit, come forward."

The little tan kit fluffed up his pelt, and with a happy push from his sister, he was on his way to the base of the slope where Sharpstar stood.

"You have showed incredible memory and focus, along with an interest in the herbs that a medicine cat is able to use to cure sickness and wounds. It is about time Mintbreeze has an apprentice; from this day forward your name shall be Seedpaw. Shadowclan looks forward to the wisdom and resourcefulness that comes with this apprenticeship."

Meeting noses with the tortoiseshell tom, Seedpaw's tail was raised in the air as they went to sit by the medicine cat den to watch his sibling's turns.

The clan turned their heads back to Sharpstar as she addressed Coldkit.

The white she-kit didn't need to be nudged to pad up to the leader, craning her neck to look up into the leader's eyes.

"Coldkit, from this day forward you shall be known as Coldpaw. Your excitement and positive attitude will no doubt bring Shadowclan a faithful and strong warrior when your time comes. Bonerun, I trust that you can teach her your hunting techniques and how she can use her bright pelt to her advantage."

Bonerun, along with his Partner Braveglare, both walked with

Coldpaw to the outskirt of the group to sit.

Focusing on the brown tom that had patiently waited his turn, the leader nodded towards Pinekit.

"Pinekit, your patience and determination are traits that will make Shadowclan stronger. From this point onward you shall be known as Pinepaw. Splitrain, I know that you will teach Pinepaw your superb fighting skills and ability to work under intense situations."

Pinepaw's eyes widened as he heard her name as his mentor, and he seemed awestruck as he touched noses with her and padded back to where Moongaze proudly looked at her. Driftswipe had come over, and she also greeted the new apprentice.

"Seedpaw! Coldpaw! Pinepaw!" the clan chanted the apprentices' names to the sky.

When everything had quieted down, Sharpstar spoke once more.

"May Starclan bless you apprentices on your journey to become warriors. As one final announcement: our deputy, Honeyflame, will be retiring to the elder's den after this Gathering. I will announce a new deputy the night of the Gathering."

Murmurs of sadness and congratulations drifted across the clearing.

"We will welcome Honeyflame to our den," Briarscratch called out, and Honeyflame chuckled from her place among the clan.

As the clearing dispersed and hunting patrols were sent out, Pinepaw turned to Splitrain.

"Wow... I can't believe Sharpstar gave me you as my mentor! You're the best cat in the clan! You'll probably become deputy too!"

Shocked to hear such compliments, all she could do was nod as she took the brown tom towards the entrance for his tour of the territory.

"He's right, you know," Driftswipe said, matching her pace as Pinepaw jumped and skipped ahead, sniffing every other fern and

tree with wide, wonder-filled eyes.

"You will definitely be in the running for deputy, now that you have an apprentice."

"Yeah, but I think Bonerun or Darkpelt will be better for the position. I don't want to lead this clan into battle; I can't handle that sort of responsibility."

"Yeah... well, Starclan already had their plans for you, so we'll have to see." Driftswipe declared.

Do they know what will happen to me?

Chapter 38- There She Is!

"Splitrain, can I go with Coldpaw for the journey to the Moonstone? Pretty please?" Pinepaw, half a moon older and already a very promising apprentice, looked up at Splitrain with wide, tired eyes. The brown apprentice had snuck out from the dirtplace tunnel last night to practice his battle moves, explaining — after a surprised Coalfoot had heard him and thought it was an enemy patrol and almost shredded him — that he wanted to be ready in case of a kittypet or rat attack.

"Well, considering that you two are the only warrior apprentices at the moment, I don't see why not; just remember you probably won't be partnered with Coldpaw... Driftswipe's kits will most likely take that title."

The honey-like flow of normal clan life swept Splitrain into a sense of normality. Pinepaw was going to be a wonderful warrior, along with his littermates. Mintbreeze was like a different cat. He wasn't as impatient and little Seedpaw seemed to bring some kindness to his personality. It was honestly refreshing, although a little strange.

The battle for deputy, much to her embarrassment — and Moongaze's pride — was between Splitrain and Darkpelt. Half the clan was on her side, at least, and it disgruntled her. She had been born, spied on, and had parents in Riverclan! Did that not bother any of them? Apparently not.

Darkpelt and his supporters claimed that he was wiser and more experienced, and Splitrain wholly agreed with them. But the shyer dark grey tom said nothing, and neither did she.

The day were becoming warm, the sting of leaf-bare finally behind them. Hints of new-leaf were finally appearing: tiny, fragile buds on the few trees that weren't pines, new undergrowth, and the birds and squirrels reappearing from where ever they go.

This particular day, or to say, evening, was pleasant; the sunset

painting the sky shades of purple and orange as Splitrain sat with her side pressed against Moongaze, watching over the clan getting ready for the Gathering.

"You know, the more I think about it, the more amazed I am at our clan. And not just ours; the fact that we went from rogues and kittypets to clans, where we don't kill outside of battle, and we catch our own food and follow the Warrior Code... it is amazing," the silver tom stated after an unmeasured stretch of silence.

To be honest, she had never thought about it that way. Her whole life had been survive, train, and trying not to get killed. Now, she would finally have that chance to experience as regular warrior. Maybe one day she could look at the Clans like that, too.

"You're right. I'm thankful that kits don't have to grow up starving and knowing true evils until they are able to handle it."

Moongaze smiled, turning his head to lick her cheek, "You'd be a wonderful mother."

The whispered statement was barely heard through the loudness right below them from the clan. Heat rose to her chest and face, and she looked up at the sky, embarrassed.

"The Gathering patrol is leaving!" Sharpstar called. Thankful for the chance of escape from the awkwardness, Splitrain leapt down and caught up with the russet she-cat.

Nothing was said as they walked in a comfortable blanket of silence at the head of the patrol.

After a while the leader seemed to become agitated.

"Sharpstar, are you okay? You look stressed."

As if surprised that Splitrain had noticed, the Shadowclan leader smiled and looked forward determined, "Just the usual stress of being leader, don't worry. Thank you for asking though," nodding a thanks, the leader peeked at Splitrain again and smiled, "You know, you've become sort of a daughter to me. I know that I haven't been the most significant cat in your Shadowclan upbringing, but..."

"Sharpstar, do not worry, I see you as a mother figure in my life. I owe you my life for saving me."

Comforted, the green eyed she-cat nodded, and faced forward once more, much more relaxed.

The night was progressively cooler as they traveled to the Fourtrees to greet the other three clans. Without noticing, the clan had swallowed her in the very middle and the toms had created a sort of flank around her sides. Taking a moment, she remembered that Riverclan is probably not the happiest that she spied and got away with it.

Windclan was the only clan there as they cascaded down the slope to greet the moor runners and waited for the other two clans to come so they could share how things the last moon had been. Maybe they would even stay longer afterwards to share tongues because of the pleasant breeze trickling through the oaks.

Greeting the Windclan warriors and apprentices, she shared her new apprentice and received the congratulations before Moongaze took her to the back of the clearing as Thunderclan raced down and signaled that Riverclan was right behind them.

"Just for safety," he stated, before she could even ask him a reason for their retreat. Settling down, they were relatively unseen by the leaders as they leapt up on the big oak tree and discussed for a heartbeat who would go first.

Glowstar wasn't groomed, and even from her distance Splitrain could see stress and lack of sleep weighing down the white she-cat.

Apparently, Sharpstar was going first, "Shadowclan is doing well. We have three new apprentices, Pinepaw, Coldpaw, and Seedpaw, who is training with Mintbreeze. Prey is becoming easier and easier to catch as new-leaf arrives.

Also, our current deputy, Honeyflame, is moving to the elder's den tomorrow. So, I thought that I would announce the new deputy—"

Glowstar let loose a feral growl, snapping her teeth as she lashed

her tail.

"Are you going to tell the clans about how you broke the Warrior Code?"

A deep unrest shuffled all four clans as the Riverclan leader continued, spitting.

"How you sent a spy into our territory, scout the territory, and get information about our upcoming attacks? Tell them, Sharpstar!"

Sharpstar kept composed while the she-cat got up in her muzzle, and Splitrain gripped her tail in Moongaze's tightly.

"Any damage that our spy caused you was a risk that you took on your own by inviting the cat into your clan."

By now, at least half the cats were murmuring and peeking around for Splitrain, and yowls were called as she was found.

"There she is! Splitrain! The spy!"

Chapter 39- It Was Done In A Moment

Cats all around turned to stare at her.

Is that her?

The one that Glowstar's all up in a hiss about?

The heated tension in the clearing continued to rise as Glowstar stared down Sharpstar, panting slightly. The deputies at the base of the four oak trees were trying to keep peace and calm in the clans, except for Rapidflame. He stood on the lowest branch, tail wrapped neatly around his paws, staring directly at her with an unreadable expression.

"Splitrain, I think that we should get you to a safer place..." Moongaze said, shuffling nervously. He was as stiff as a tree, and was also looking at Rapidflame.

Before she could answer, Glowstar spoke again.

"Starclan sent Dreamsong a message last night, saying that we had the right to punish Splitrain as we saw fit!"

A whisper of silence fell across the clans as they digested what the white Riverclan leader had stated.

"That's mouse-dung!" an unknown cat from the mass yowled.

"Quiet, you ignorant kit," Rapidflame growled, "Glowstar is telling the truth, and it does not seem that Starclan has a problem," he pointed out, motioning to the full moon, which stood proudly with not a cloud in sight.

The other two leaders stood with unrest, glancing nervously at the other and to their clan. Fernstar, the Thunderclan leader, leaned his black-furred head to speak to the Windclan she-cat beside him

before turning back to the other two leaders, still glaring heatedly at the other.

"Thunderclan and Windclan are calling neutrality in this argument."

While the two now-neutral clans shuffled away from Riverclan and Shadowclan happily, Moongaze was joined by Bonerun and Driftswipe in his nervous pushes to leave.

Shaking them off with a leap, Splitrain found herself padding in between the separation between the clans towards the front. She had no idea what she was doing, and she was honestly goodness-to-Starclan terrified. What can she do?

Her hesitation in her steps brought Glowstar out of her trance and hissed, back arching and lips drawn back to reveal yellow fangs at Splitrain.

"You," she growled, tensing to leap at her.

Just as the Riverclan leader was about to make her jump, Sharpstar tackled the white she-cat by the shoulders and together they fell to the base of the trees, some five fox-lengths below.

Almost immediately, the two clans leapt against the other in a mass of hissing and yowl of rage and anger. Shadowclan, to protect. Riverclan, to destroy.

In the midst of the fight, Splitrain lost sight of both the two leaders and Moongaze. Completely dazed, she only saw cats in masses of claws and teeth, and blood leaking into the soil.

The moon still was uncovered.

Desperate for her Partner so she could fight, she dodged the fights and claws in her search for Driftswipe. Instead, she fell upon Rapidflame and Honeyflame, both on their hind legs and exchanging slashes. The tan Shadowclan deputy was bleeding heavily from a torn ear and a swollen eye, while the grey tom was barely affected, with only a small scratch on her shoulder. The she-cat was obviously on the defense, trying to block Rapidflame's seemingly endless torrent of swipes to her eyes, face, and chest. Her

balance was failing as she struggled to stay up on her hind legs.

With a swift kick, the Riverclan deputy had shot a paw out and caught the legs out from under her, using the moment of unbalance to pin the Shadowclan deputy to the ground and fasten his teeth to her throat.

Almost in a haze, Splitrain tried to move but felt as if her paws were made of stone. She willed, yowled at herself to move, but by then it was too late.

With the blood on his chin as he dropped and pushed away the lifeless body of the former deputy, Rapidflame laid eyes on his eyes on her.

"Well, look who's come back," he said happily, licking the blood off one of his grey paws, making sure she could see the red in his mouth and the tan fur between his claws as he shook them out.

"It's a shame I don't know who the new deputy is, of course I would kill them too! Do ya know, Splittie?"

Rapidflame sauntered over, hips swaying. As he came closer, his tail, which was rather long, wrapped around her neck teasingly as he pressed his mouth against her ear, gently nipping.

"I wish I didn't have to kill you, but mother says so~" he sang wickedly under his breath.

"M-Mother?" Splitrain stuttered, pulling back in confusing to look at the deranged tom.

"Yes, you mouse-brain. My mother's Glowstar. And here I thought you were smart."

The chaos around them, with several cats laying in pools of their own blood around them, was lost in the sound of her heartbeat.

She did not know it then, but Rapidflame had been angling his head for a fatal bite when a high-pitched yowl rang through the clearing, fearful and hair-raising.

With all motion stopped, Sharpstar displayed the limp, slight white body in her jaws.

Rapidflame turned. His eyes widened in horror. Then he set his face in determination.

It only took a moment.

He ran, surefooted around the few motionless cats and used the force in his speed to push his full weight against the russet and blood covered leader, pushing her down. Like a hawk, he shot down on top of her.

The sickening crack froze her stomach as she turned around slowly to see her leader, her mother, her savior...

Lying limply, with blood trickling out of her mouth. Her eyes were wide, and her neck was twisted at an unnatural angle.

Dead.

Chapter 40- They Will Pay

Dead.

Dead.

Splitrain stood in the middle of chaos, staring blankly at the mass of fur that had been Sharpstar.

The silence around her swirled and churned. The stars of her ancestors twinkled cruelty more felt now than ever before.

Moongaze was speaking to her, but his voice was muffled. Her gaze never left the sight in front of her.

Rapidflame stood over Sharpstar's body, triumphant hate in his blue eyes as he looked straight at her, as if to say 'this is what happens when you cross me.'

Windclan and Thunderclan alike were horror-struck, staring at each other, as if they were dreaming.

As if it was all just a nightmare.

No nightmare could compare to this reality as Rapidflame slowly climbed up to the lowest branch of the Fourtrees. The medicine cats were a blur as they took the chance to start prepping and healing the wounds of the rather quick fight. From the sound of it, no cat seemed to be injured too badly.

Clearing his throat, savoring the mixed looks of horror from three clans and glee from one, Rapidflame spoke out into the quiet clearing, hushed with apprehension.

"As Riverclan's new leader, I declare war on Shadowclan on the basis of Glowstar's death. No mercy shall be given until surrender is given."

Cries of horror rippled through the mass of cats, and just as Fernstar

opened his jaws to protest, Rapidflame chuckled and glared at the black Thunderclan leader.

"And let's not forget that Thunderclan and Windclan have called neutrality. There's nothing that they can do."

And that was that.

"And now, I believe that Shadowclan had a couple of things to decide? The new leader and deputy?"

Worried and lost looks were exchanged around Shadowclan in particular as both Splitrain and Darkpelt were sought out.

"They were the candidates."

"...One becomes leader and the other deputy...?"

"What will Starclan think?"

Mintbreeze was the first to speak up. Seedpaw, quaking in fear but determined, pressed his forepaws against Blackrose's wounded shoulder in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

"I know who Sharpstar was going to appoint deputy," he claimed. Glancing up to the stars, he closed his eyes and seemed to send a silent prayer to Starclan.

"Splitrain was Sharpstar's choice, and although much too young, the Warrior Code states that the deputy shall become the new leader when the old one dies. She is Shadowclan's new leader."

All was quiet. Jaws moved, and opinions were called out, but Splitrain heard none of it.

Cats parted around her, giving her a wide girth as she padded blankly forward to Mintbreeze. She stared into his brown eyes, filled to the brim with worry and sadness. Giving a nod, she made the sound of Darkpelt's name on her tongue. She did not hear it, but he seemed to. Another nod and a call to the crowd, and Darkpelt moved forward and touched his shoulder against hers, not ready when Splitrain almost collapsed.

Driftswipe raced to them and gave her other shoulder to aid Splitrain in standing before she began to go into shock.

A ringing approached her ears as the other clans began to reluctantly file out. Scarred apprentices clung to the sides of mothers and fathers, elders and mentors.

This was not a night that any cat would be able to forget. Two leaders, dead in one night, with two young cats assuming the new ending of '-star' to their names, and a war declared between Shadowclan and Riverclan, all during a Gathering.

Most of Shadowclan stayed long after everyone else had left, only a few leaving to notify the warriors still at camp.

Mintbreeze also left to grab herbs for shock, and to prepare traveling herbs for Splitrain and Darkpelt.

They would leave for the Moonstone at sunhigh the following day.

A vigil was held for Sharpstar where she lay. Warriors collected lavender from near the marshes of Riverclan, bringing them back along with basic herbs for healing, which they said a Thunderclan patrol brought.

With the lavender in her russet fur, Sharpstar had lost the sent that Splitrain would never again smell, and stole away the last of the warmth that clung to her still form.

Resting her muzzle in the bent neck of her savior, she keened a low, pained yowl full of sadness and grief. Her clan mates around her took up the call, mourning to the stars and the moon, to the cloudless sky, and to the destruction of Riverclan.

Chapter 41- Nine

Sharpstar's vigil was done at sunrise and the senior warriors carried her back to camp, but Splitrain was nowhere close to being able to say goodbye. Skyheart was not her mother. Sharpstar was. Now she was truly an orphan.

Moongaze, who had watched her with worried eyes, now took this free moment, before Mintbreeze came back with the herbs, to lick her cheek and whisper sweet nothings in her ears, telling her that everything would be okay. Driftswipe was sleeping nearby with Bonerun, who sat silently watching the sun rise higher into the sky.

The forest and clearing was eerily quiet, as if the very creatures were mourning, also. Splitrain felt a dullness in her head and paws as she pulled her body over to the huge Fourtrees and climbed up onto the lowest branch. Her Clanmates had all realized that she was going to speak and awoke all who were sleeping, and she waited another moment before speaking with a shaky voice:

"My fellow Clanmates, Riverclan owes us much blood and pain. Sharpstar is-is dead, and I shall be leaving shortly to receive my nine lives from Starclan. Like you, I do not know how Starclan could have let the Gathering last night happen, but I know that Starclan has their reasons. We will never forget Sharpstar, and I will avenge her death. At this time I am asking you all to go back to camp and get rest in your nests. Moongaze, will you please arrange a hunting patrol when you get back and watch the clan until I return?"

With Moongaze's slight nod, Shadowclan as a while bowed their head and chanted to the sky. "Splitstar! Splitstar! Splitstar!"

Ducking her head in both embarrassment and remorse, Splitrain leaped down and met the gaze and warm nudge of the silver warrior. Following him to a secluded part of the clearing as their clan mates began to leave, he let her bury her head in his neck and let loose one stray sob before collecting herself. Moongaze nuzzled

her jaw and gave her cheek a lick before leaning in.

"Splitrain, I know this is probably the worst time for me to ask this, but with the battle coming up, and you about to become leader, I think I need this more than ever... may I have the honor of becoming your mate?"

Letting out a little noise as she buried her face in his shoulder again, she nodded her head.

"Yes," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut to escape the tears threatening to fall, out of mixed joy and mourning.

The sun broke them apart as it was almost completely above them. Mintbreeze's scent was wafting towards them as he carried the needed herbs, Darkpelt and Driftswipe at his sides.

"Eat," he ordered, pushing a neatly wrapped pile of sour leaves and a couple mint leaves placed neatly at the top.

Grimacing as she lapped them up, Moongaze smirked. "The last time you ate those, you were an apprentice, about to go to the Moonstone with me." Happy memories kept from the taste getting to her too much as Splitrain finished the bundle and nodded to Mintbreeze. Glancing between her and her new mate, he rolled his eyes and backed away.

"We'll leave in a moment."

Shooting at the grumpy medicine cat a grateful look, she turned around to lick Moongaze on the cheeks.

"I'll be back in the morning. Please take care of the clan."

"I'll try," he joked, but when he saw her nervousness, he straightened. "Splitpaw, Splitrain, or Splitstar, I love you and I have complete faith in you. You are perfect and you will do perfectly."

Closing her eyes at the compliments, trying desperately to believe his encouragements on becoming leader, she wondered how she would ever be able to do this.

Giving one last lick, he nudged her away with a reassuring smile.

Mintbreeze, Darkpelt, and Driftswipe were waiting for her, and they began immediately for the Moonstone.

The sun set fast as they passed the Thunderpath, twoleg place, and the gently sloping hills with straightly lined trees that led to the mountain and the place inside where cats had been coming for countless generations to speak with Starclan.

The stars were just becoming known as they neared the base of the mountain. Mintbreeze sidled to the front, and loosely gripping his tail between her teeth, Splitrain followed, Driftswipe and Darkpelt following her example as they padded into the dark tunnel and her eyes helped her no more.

In the darkness, she was sure that she felt pelts brushing beside her, though all that was there was cold stone. She hoped it was Starclan.

After what seemed like countless heartbeats of downward tunnels, it spat them out a tail-length from the sparkling moonstone. The moon, just barely shrunk from the full moon last night, was almost peeking out from the hole in the celling far up above them.

Mintbreeze stood to the side and motioned for Splitrain to go ahead. Hesitantly settling herself at the base of the moonstone, taking a deep breath she just barely touched the tip of her nose to the cold stone, and watched as her vision went dark.

Blinking her eyes open, Splitrain squinted into the bright light and almost leapt back. There was a little amber eyed kit. Looking past she saw countless different cats. Her surroundings could only be described as white.

Looking back at the brown tabby kit, Splitrain smiled, surprised to hear a slight purr in her throat.

The kit squeaked in happiness and backed up to let her rise to her paws.

"I'm Briarkit." The little she-cat introduced herself. "Welcome to Starclan."

Splitrain was about to reply when the kit stood on the tips of her paws and spoke again.

"With this life, I give you playfulness. Even the toughest leaders must know when to be a kit and bond with the weak and sad."

When their noses touched, a tingling warmth filled her whole body, and she was almost regretful as Briarkit gave one last smile and faded into the mass of cats.

The next cat made her heart clench.

Sharpstar smiled a small smile. She was younger, healthier looking. All the stress was gone from her shoulders. Her ears were perked as she dipped her head.

"With this life, I give you kindness. Use this life to take in the homeless, heal the hurt, and love the alone."

With another touch of noses, a burning wave passed through her body, from her claws to her tail. She tried to flinch away, but her paws were stone.

Even after Sharpstar pulled away, Splitrain's body was still alight with painful shocks.

"I will always be with you," the russet leader whispered, and then she was replaced by a jet black cat with a white chest. Icy blue eyes met hers as the last of the pain disappeared.

"My name is Whitestar. I watched your birth, young kit," the leader smiled, as if reminiscing something happy. Taking another step forward, she touched noses.

"With this life, I give you determination. Go through with what you know to be right. Win every battle; convince even the worst of the elders, because whatever you think you can't do, you can."

Bracing herself, Splitrain was greeted by an icy cold shower and pinpricks on her face and paws. Silent, she nodded her stiff neck and waited for the next cat to give her a life.

A grey tom with speckles greeted her with a regal smile.

"I am Volewhisker. With this life, I give you forgiveness. Revenge is sweet and sometimes just, but a grudge against one cat is not one against the Clan."

A dulling of her senses was followed by the touching of their muzzles, and she swayed slightly on her paws.

A pale grey, almost white she-cat padded forward, her eyes a milky white. Blind.

A smirk was all she received, although it was kind. "I'm Dovefeather. With this life, I give you courage. You will lose count of the cats who doubt you, who judge you for things you can't control, but you must remember that they know no better."

With each life, it was becoming harder and harder to stay upright.

Birdsong gave her pride. It burned and seemed to eat away at her mind and vision. It felt almost like a warning.

Fogbreath gave her cleverness. It tickled, but stung and made her head hurt.

A dainty white kit named Breezekit gave her respect, which tasted like metal and blood.

Last came Shardflame. A slight limp hinted at a past injury, but he seemed content as he gave her last life: love. It seemed to reverse the effects of the last eight and filled her with strength and courage.

"Starclan welcomes you as the leader of Shadowclan. Your path will be troubled and dark at times, but walk it well, young one."

Splitstar's eyes drifted shut as the cats of Starclan tipped their heads towards the white expance above them and called her name.

Chapter 42- Revenge Is Upon Us

Splitstar had only one word to describe how she felt: the blistering need for revenge.

The nine lives ceremony seemed to have given her new strength, and she felt as if she could overcome Rapidstar at this very moment. Kill him, make sure Riverclan would never be a threat to Shadowclan ever again, and finally live her life without death and judgment overhanging like a snow-laden branch.

The cavern where her ancestors spoke was slightly filled with a cool light from the sun; the night was gone and replaced by the cool morning breeze that indicated a hint of Green-leaf. No birds lived this high up without trees, but she could imagine them, flitting in the pale pink sky, feasting on worms from the soft soil underfoot. The very thought made her mouth water slightly, both for bird and the freedom that came with green-leaf.

In the new light, the floor was dusty and gritty, though had not given her pelt any damage or any soreness, surprisingly enough. The cave was about five fox-lengths across, with the hole in the slanting roof an unmeasurable space above. Her fellow Clanmates were all in various stages of awakening, shifting in their sleep and blinking sleep away.

Darkpelt, her new deputy, rose and stretched, nodding a warm greeting to her and padding over after giving his chest fur a few licks to rid it of any dust.

"I'm guessing everything went well?" he inquired in his deep mew, tail wrapped neatly around his paws as he awaited an answer.

Did everything go well? It hurt, that was for sure. Was it supposed to, or was it her fault? What had all those lives given to her meant? She was pretty sure she already had kindness, forgiveness? And

what happened when you lost that life? Would she not have compassion anymore? When she was down to her last life, would she be an empty shell, awaiting death?

No, because Sharpstar had not been like that.

But wait, what life had Sharpstar been on when she had passed?

Ignoring Darkpelt's query for the moment, she glanced at Mintbreeze. In what she hoped sounded like cool indifference, she asked,

"How many lives had Sharpstar lost when she died?"

A confused expression graced the medicine cat's face as he struggled with waking up, but he answered.

"Six. She had three lives left."

Nodding her thanks, Driftswipe gave her a strange look but padded towards the exit.

"Can we go? I feel uncomfortable talking of this in a place meant for speaking to the dead."

Splitstar shrugged and followed her Partner out of the mountain.

...

Back at the camp, the shadow of Sharpstar's death still clung to every breath made and every step taken. Tails drooped, and every few moments there would be a sniff or a sob from one of the older cats and the elders, who watched Sharpstar grow up from kithood.

Mintbreeze showed Splitstar her new den, along with the palm leaves and chunks of black rock strewn across the space and a nest shoved in the corner. Another pang seared through her chest as she took a deep breath and dismissed Mintbreeze. Moongaze, on her other side, pressed his shoulder against hers and licked her cheek comfortingly.

"Everything will be okay... I promise," he murmured into the

silence, and she almost believed him.

Before further examination could be given to the den, a clan meeting had to be called, and battle preparations made.

It was painful to bound up the sand mound and call all the cats to gather, because it would never again be Sharpstar's voice, but her own. With pain and anger battling in all of their hearts, it was decided that the apprentices would help Mintbreeze to collect the necessary herbs today after the meeting, and all patrols were to keep on the lookout for cobwebs. Two hunting patrols today would keep all the cats well-fed, and it was insisted that if you were not a part of a patrol, training was mandatory, as was a curfew a little after sundown so no cat would suffer from lack of sleep.

"I do not think I need to tell any of you to fight, but I am requesting that the apprentices and Driftswipe not participate in combat. I know Mintbreeze will need all the help he can get."

Protests from the 'paws were evident, but they would thank her later. Driftswipe, on her left, though, gave a yowl of protest.

"If I do not fight as your Partner, then you are much weaker, Splitstar! We can't risk losing another leader! Kits are not coming until this battle is long won; there is no danger of losing them if I get injured."

As much as it hurt to refuse her Partner, she let her stone faced expression tell the pregnant she-cat what her final answer was.

"What is important, is every one of you ready to fight Riverclan. We will avenge Sharpstar, and we will remind the whole forest who the most terrifying and powerful clan is."

Inspired by her speech, Shadowclan cheered in agreement and separated into patrols or training groups for the day. The apprentices trailed behind Mintbreeze, disappointed but still hopeful that they might be needed in the front lines.

Starclan, she hoped not.

Chapter 43- It All Clicked

Moongaze stared at her in awe as she studied Sharpstar's drawings.

"Do you think they're anything important?" he inquired, tilting his head to try and decipher the squiggles and marks on the shriveled leaves.

"I don't know. They could be anything,"

"Or, in fact, nothing at all," Mintbreeze commented, bowing his head slightly as he entered the rather large cave.

Splitstar raised her head with an irritated look. "You're quite the pessimist today, Mintbreeze, although let me tell you, it's not appreciated."

She winced as his eyes widened slightly in shock.

She didn't mean to be so rude, but given the circumstances with a war looming over her head, along with the job of saving innocent souls and bringing peace to the forest on one of the youngest leaders — if not the youngest — is quite the burden. She hadn't asked for any of this! Sure, she wanted revenge on Riverclan. Who didn't? But becoming deputy and then leader in two heartbeats, warriorhood gone in one deathly action... it was starting to rush her, and Splitstar wasn't sure if she would stay standing.

Moongaze pressed comfortingly against her shoulder, gesturing with his tail for Mintbreeze to go do something important. Didn't he have 'paws to lead or something?

Splitstar's head swam. "I think I need to take a walk," she muttered, licking her mate's ear before brushing past both of the toms and leaping down to the clearing a tail length below. Her Clanmates looked at her, some bowing their heads or giving small smiles, although by now most of them had left on patrol.

Lost in her train of thought, Splitstar jumped when Driftswipe came up alongside her, tail wrapping comfortingly around hers.

"I know a spot in the forest that the patrols won't bother us," she whispered, and gratefully Splitstar followed her Partner into the woods.

The forest was alive with sounds of life. Squirrels leapt from branch to branch, collecting nuts and being squirrels. The smell of adventurous mice and birds daring to swoop over their heads made her mouth water as sunlight filtered down through the pine needles and the few broad leafed trees that populated Shadowclan's land. Wind blew softly, bringing the warmth and promise of a sweltering Green-leaf to come, and little sprouts dotted the ground, reviving the undergrowth and crawling up trees and across the dirt.

"My kits will be born in such a good season," the queen mused, gazing around with life and contentment in her green eyes.

"They will indeed,"

It was quiet once more, until a little brown form shuffled through the moss on a nearby tree. The two instantly dropped to their hunting crouches and Driftswipe circled around, struggling to keep her growing belly from brushing the ground and alerting the mouse to their presence. Splitstar went in the other direction just as silently to intercept the creature as soon as her partner scared it... now!

Driftswipe nudged a leaf, making a barely audible crack, and the mouse took off, right into Splitstar's waiting claws.

She cracked it's tiny neck and sent a silent thanks to Starclan. Driftswipe came over, sniffed, and nodded happily.

"It's nice to hunt again," Driftswipe stated, settling down to take a small bite. "Bonerun wants to keep me inside the camp at all times! He is such an overprotective tom, but I love him."

Taking a bite herself, Splitstar just nodded, lost in her thoughts. Leaves and charcoal marks and a feeling in the back of her head

that she just couldn't identify.

Their day together was mostly comfortable silences, each deep in thought but keeping the other company. It was nice.

On the way back to camp, the sun was beginning to set and they each carried a mouse for the fresh kill pile.

And it hit her.

It finally made sense.

Not speaking a word, she dropped her mouse and bounded the rest of the way to the camp, barreling through the briars surrounding the camp and leaping up into her den. There she splayed out the leaves, marks in the corner up and all pointing forward.

It still didn't look like anything important, but she she closed her eyes and remembered, it all clicked into place.

Sharpstar had left battle plans.

Chapter 44- Death To Them All?

It had been three days since Splitstar's discovery. Three days spent in the corner of the den, hunched over leaves marked with fading charcoal and plans. Three days since Riverclan's fate was sealed.

Three days since her own destiny was sealed.

The sky outside her den was dark and foreboding, the clouds heavy with rain and thunder. No drops had fallen yet, but Splitstar was sure they were on their way. The air was cool, wind blowing rather strongly on the pines surrounding the clearing, their swaying slow and calming. Most cats were inside their dens, getting some much-needed rest as the moon began its rise somewhere behind the clouds.

The musky smell of the den was starting to get to her head, so with creaking joints she hoisted herself up and towards the mouth of the den. Moongaze, who had been fast asleep in their shared nest, raised his head and blinked tiredly.

"You okay?" he yawned, shifting onto his other side and watching her with steady, tired eyes. He had been training day in and day out with the rest of the warriors, as well as helping her decipher the leaves. He deserved a good night's sleep. She hadn't told him her plan yet.

He would try to stop her.

"Yeah, I'm good. I just need some fresh air. Get some sleep," she replied, smiling tiredly.

With a confirmative nod from her mate, Splitstar made her way out into the clearing to the fresh-kill pile. It was about half full, but a hunting patrol was on their way back, from the sounds of subdued laughter and murmurs from just beyond the entrance.

A few heartbeats later the group broke through, each carrying either a squirrel or mouse, along with the occasional vole, by which was carried by none other than Braveglare.

Nodding to the reddish brown tom in greeting, he proceeded to pad over, dropping the vole at her feet.

"Only the best for you," he joked, chuckling as Splitstar glared for a moment before taking a bite. The warmth felt heavenly on her tongue and her stomach gurgled in appreciation.

"So what brings you out of your cave?" the blue eyes warrior started, herding her through the entrance as soon as she had finished her meal.

"Thinking," she muttered. She was ashamed to say she didn't know Braveglare that well as an apprentice. He always had a big mouth and never thought about what he said, and no matter how hard she had tried Splitstar could not get it out of her head how rude he had been when she had first come here.

The tom huffed, letting out a low growl as he stopped in front of her path with a frustrated expression.

"Look, I know we aren't the best of friends, but I am a warrior of Shadowclan and you are its leader. We work together. I am not asking you to confess your plans for clan, but open up to me a bit. I'm sorry for the way I treated you as an apprentice, okay? I'm not going to say I've grown up, because I haven't, but I promise to shut up,"

Meeting the tom's firm gaze for countless heartbeats, Splitstar looked away.

"As your superior, don't you think it's my decision whether to tell you or not?"

The look on the tom's face was priceless. "Y-Yes, but I thought..."

"I'm kidding, you mouse-brain,"

He stuttered for a moment more. "You are?"

Letting loose a small purr, she flicked his snout with her tail as she began walking again.

"Obviously."

The tom still stood there, looking confused and a little stunned as Splitstar looked behind her shoulder.

"Do you not want to hear my plans now? Fine by me," she teased, snorting as he stumbled over himself to catch up again.

They walked for a little ways more before settling down from the first stray drops that weaved through the pines.

"It's hard to believe that we're the same age sometimes," he said, breaking the silence. "You seem so composed and... prepared. You act like a senior warrior, and even they agree that you do, too. I don't think there's a cat in this clan who doesn't support you entirely."

"That's great, but that's just an image. I have no idea what I'm doing, Braveglare."

He cocked his head. "Well, what's your plan? Or, uh, do you... have one?"

Splitstar flicked her ears in his direction. "Of course I have a plan, bird brain, I just... don't know if it'll work."

"Well, what is it, then?"

So she explained. The clouds above them swirled, reflecting the inner turmoil she felt. Explaining the plan made the outcome no more certain. It was like knowing there was something beyond the fog, something big, but only being able to see the slightest outline.

It was quiet for only a moment, but it wasn't full of 'are you crazy' and 'that is so stupid' like she thought it would. Instead she heard, "Are you sure that's what you want?"

Her brain, although it was a simple question, could not come up with a good answer. Or an answer at all.

Braveglare shuffled his body over so he could snag her gaze with a serious expression.

"Answer this, who are you angry at?"

The answer came instantly. "Rapidstar."

"Not at the clan? Not at your mother and father?"

"...No."

"And why not? Your anger and resentment would be justified. The clan— the forest wouldn't think any less of you for it."

"Oh, trust me, I do resent them. I hate them with every hair on my body. But that is not something I drag my clan into. That is not a fight I can risk losing anyone's life over. It is a personal battle I will fight alone, for the rest of my existence."

Braveglare nodded, looking impressed.

"Well, if your battle is against Rapidstar and him alone, why does your plan include the repression of every Riverclan warrior?"

Splitstar was silent. There was no answer.

The Shadowclan warrior continued. "You need to understand the difference between the leader and the followers. Most of the clan doesn't want to be in an all-out war, I bet. I know the queens, the kits, the elders don't.

"What you need to determine is what this war is, Splitstar. It is the revenge of Sharpstar's death. And what will you do to get that revenge?"

Her claws slid out of her paws, slicing into soft moss and dead nettles. "Death."

"The death of Riverclan?"

"No," Splitstar said, looking up at the storm clouds, "Of Rapidstar."

Chapter 45- They Are Not Done With Her Just Yet

"May all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the rock slope for a clan meeting!" Splitstar howled. The sky was just turning dark; clouds making the suns light leave faster than normal. A cool breeze was blowing, and with a sigh she realized that rain would most definitely fall during the night.

Out of the corners of the clearing came the cats of Shadowclan. Black and grey fur predominated the clearing, faces shadowed and eyes glowing in the growing darkness as she awaited the last few cats to join them. Sometimes Splitstar forgot that this clan — her clan, was the most feared. The most hated. Never had she felt more comfortable, more proud of this fact.

As the last cat settled down, she raised her tail to silence the murmurs.

"Cats of Shadowclan, Riverclan's evildoings have gone on for long enough. Because of them, our leader was killed. Because of them, we were made to look weak! Should we let them off without punishment?"

There was no disagreement in the howls that her clan emitted.

"Good. We shall ambush them tonight."

Shock, then anger and excitement took over. Eager younger warriors jostled each other and scraped their claws against the rocks littering the ground. The older, senior warriors grinned, shouldering each other and showing feral fangs. The three apprentices looked overwhelmed. Coldpaw and Pinepaw, both with their brother Seedkit, stood around Mintbreeze.

Now, for the hardest part.

"Every warrior — and apprentice - who can fight is asked to come, but Driftswipe, you must stay behind for your kits, along with you, Moongaze, to protect the camp and elders."

The crowd did not object, and neither did Driftswipe. She knew this was coming and was resigned to her fate. But there was one distinct yowl of frustration.

"What do you mean, 'stay behind'? I'm your mate!" Moongaze was furious, yes, but you could tell he was hurt as well.

"I—"

"No," he interrupted, growling, getting close enough to where their noses were almost touching. "I cannot lose you," he murmured with a gasp. "It's already bad enough you will have no Partner, but no one to protect you? Are you insane?"

"Moongaze, I love you. Can you please trust me?" Splitstar could barely speak, her throat was so tight.

"But why?" he pleaded.

"Because this is bigger than just us now. It's bigger than some family feud. This is about revenge and proving once and for all that this clan is not one that Riverclan can push around."

Moongaze took a shaky breath, pressing his face into her shoulder as time began to tear them apart.

"But if I say goodbye to you know, can you promise that I'll see you again?"

Splitstar pulled away. "Yes," she vowed with a breaking voice. "I promise."

With one last final glance at his mate, Moongaze leapt down to talk with the elders and Darkpelt came up to discuss battle strategies.

"Can you bring Mintbreeze and Seedpaw up here, please?" she asked her dark-furred deputy, who bowed his head and brought the white medicine cat, his tan 'paw at his side, jumpy and nervous.

"What do you need, Splitstar? Seedpaw and I were preparing herbs for after the battle."

"That'll have to be put on hold," she muttered, dragging out from her den one of the leaves that Sharpstar had marked on.

"This plan will not work without you."

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Your name is Mintbreeze, and you are currently soaking wet.

Splitstar sent you and your little 'paw on a nice little walk to the heart of Riverclan territory during a hailstorm.

Heads down, you and Seedpaw slowly traverse through undergrowth and mud in an attempt to stay warm, although with ice bouncing off your bodies it is almost impossible.

Nearing the river, you took an inward groan. It was sure to be flooded beyond hope. Great.

You were nervous about fighting, especially knowing that you were going to be in the center of it all. Your mentor, Clearshadow, had only showed you the basics of defense.

Even more worrisome was Seedpaw, whose both experience and training were almost zero.

What was Splitstar thinking?

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Your name is Moongaze, and you are angry. Frustrated. Confused.

Your mate told you to stay behind, to watch over the elders, over Driftswipe, and stay out of the battle.

Why had she done that?

You were nervous. If you knew anything about her, then she had something very dangerous and self-sacrificing planned. It was the only explanation.

And he was not going to let her do it.

With a huff, he gave a nod to Bonerun, who has stayed behind since Moongaze was his partner.

With reckless thoughts, he ran towards the direction of the Riverclan camp, opposite to where the battle patrols went.

He was going to save his mate.

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Your name is Coldpaw. You are really, really excited about what is about to occur. Your first battle! Maybe you'll get your warrior name early, if you are really good.

You're also really cold and wet from the hail, but you were sure it would only make the memory even better.

Your brother Pinepaw runs beside you. The Shadowclan leader, Splitstar, is a little ways in front of you. Your mentor, Bonerun, was not with you, but you were not scared. He showed you how to act tough and send a cat running. You just hoped you could make him proud.

Splitstar raised her tail for them to stop. From the smell of it, they were just outside of Riverclan's camp.

Straining your ears, you pick up Mintbreeze's mew, along with your

other brother's fear scent.

She could just pick up the medicine cat's voice.

"Y-yes, I know it is hailing outside. Yes, I know we are at war right now. But we need herbs, and your clan is the closest."

"What do you mean, 'we do not help cats from Shadowclan'? Our whole clan is dying from green cough! Can you really not spare us some catmint?"

What Coldpaw was guessing was the Riverclan medicine cat's reply was very rude.

"Fine then," Mintbreeze conceded, his voice tightening in anticipation. "This was one final test," he chuckled.

"And you failed. Shadowclan will remember this."

Before he was finished speaking, you and the other six or seven warriors in your patrol leapt through the reeds with screeches so loud whoever was asleep still was now wide awake and disoriented.

Splitstar, the leader of your patrol, nudged Darkpelt's shoulder as she veered away to an unknown location, but that was the least of your worries. The initial surprise was over, and now warriors and apprentices were streaming out of their dens, furious.

Eyes wide to the sight before you as your brother turned into a mass of teeth and claws with an apprentice, you didn't register that you were in danger before it was too late.

Teeth wrapped around your shoulder and you went flying as the force of impact reached you. A full grown warrior was on top of you, slashing and tearing and making your stomach a mass of shredded fur.

With little pants you tried to fight for air, but it was too difficult, your chest felt like it had a million splinters in it, and most of your body was numb, although the warrior kept fighting and biting.

After a while, or maybe a second, he got off of you. You lost track

of time. You could not breathe. You could not think. Pale, white warriors surrounded you and called your name.

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Splitstar stood at the base of the ravine, at a stalemate with a murderer.

Fur plastered to both of your bodies, you and Rapidstar stood about a three tail lengths away from each other.

The grey leader's face was shadowed, but it did not matter to her any longer. He was not the kit who left the sparkling objects in her nest. He was not the apprentice she met with in secret. He was a monster. His hunger for dominance and power had twisted his mind so that he was his own huge figure, dimming everyone else.

"So, are you here to kill me?" he inquired coolly, head tilted to the side in a disgusting imitation of innocence.

Splitstar had to dig her claws into the soft, wet earth to keep herself from leaping at him right this instance. But she was at a disadvantage. Her back was to the ravine's drop, about a tail length away, and its fall made her stomach drop just thinking about it.

Still giving no answer to the tom, she steadied herself and inched to the left.

"Answer or not, one of us isn't going to see the light of day," he cackled, kneading the ground with bloody paws.

When Splitstar still didn't answer, he grew agitated.

"You know, I got into a little scuffle before cornering you here."

Her mind was filled with only one thing: inch to the left when he looks away. Inch to the left.

"This little 'paw, stark white. She didn't fight back at all. It was quite funny, actually."

Just inch to the left. Coldpaw can't be avenged if you don't move to the left.

Rapidstar licked a bloody paw in contempt. "A couple of your others put up a fight too, but I pride myself on being unbeaten in battle."

Inch to the left. To the left. To the left.

"Are you going to try and change that, little Rainkit?"

The hail had stopped, she noted numbly, but the rain carried on at a softer pace.

Left, left, left, left, left.

The roaring of the ravine below them both was a dull but constant noise at the back of her head.

"And if I say yes?" she finally spoke.

"Well, that doesn't change the outcome of this match," Rapidstar smirked, "But it definitely makes it a lot more fun."

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The Riverclan camp was still full of battle when Moongaze arrived. The mud underneath his paws was sticky with blood and littered with hail and bodies.

He tried not at them too closely as he followed his mate's scent trail towards a ravine full of fear scent and blood.

He saw Rapidstar first.

His frame was muscular and well-built even with his pelt clinging to

his body, and his body shook with repressed anger. He seemed to be in a conversation with Splitstar, but he couldn't see her from his position.

"You seem to forget that I too lost a mother that day. Your leader killed my mother first, and I repaid that favor. So why are you here, Rainkit?"

"I am here for Coldpaw, then." His mate replied with a determined mew.

"What? For that little 'paw? Hardly worth risking your life for the impossible!"

"Every life is worth it," Splitstar hissed. Moongaze could tell she was preparing to attack him, pushing him towards the ravine and to the both of their deaths.

He could not let that happen. He had sworn to give his life for his mate, and he was not going to back out of his vow.

He loved her.

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Finally, she wasn't the one in a compromising position, but Rapidstar.

"Every life is worth it," she replied to the Riverclan leader.

"And my name is not Rainkit. It is Splitstar."

Two bounds and she connected bodies with him.

One tail-length to the edge of the ravine.

Half a heartbeat before she realized there was something terribly wrong.

Rapidstar had not fought her as she leapt onto him. His gaze was focused behind her.

And then she smelled him.

Moongaze.

"Get away from my mate!" he screeched, shoving her aside and engaging in a bloody and short fight with the grey tom.

In moments Rapidstar had her mate on his back, claws on his chest and blood in his mouth.

She had been thrown back, and Splitstar stood in shock and confusion. She had told him to wait at the camp... but she should've known better.

With her heart beating in her throat as everything seemed to go slow and then stop, her mind chose now to throw at her memories of her tom, currently dying right in front of her: the warmth of his gaze when they first woke up in the mornings. His heart, beating in rhythm with hers as he pulled her further into the forest with love in his eyes. His everything.

His blood, flowing in an endless tide towards her paws, before splitting into little rivulets from the rain. His pain. His love, strong enough to sacrifice himself for her.

All at once, without a thought and with her mind full of memories, with no heartbeat but a racing pulse, she moved into action, hooking her claws into the stomach of the Riverclan leader and dragged him over the edge of the ravine with her right behind.

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Fog clouded her eyes as she tried to open them. Her fur was heavy with rainwater and wariness. She had been walking all night and into the morning.

She had no idea why she survived and Rapidstar didn't. Luck? Starclan? She was afraid that she would never know, but she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

She could no longer see through her right eye, or feel the whole right side of her face, for that matter. It may have been how she landed in the shallow river below, even though it was swollen with rain water.

Blood dripped down from multiple wounds as she heaved another breath and took another breath.

She was afraid she would not make it much longer. But she had a promise to keep.

Flashes of bodies would forever haunt her in her sleep, but forever did not seem it would be very long anymore.

Coldpaw. Braveglare. Blackrose. Sweetpetal. Coalfoot. Smokefur. Strongsoul. Skyheart. Dreamsong. Iceheart.

Neither clan would be the same.

The aftermath of the storm left birds chirping and a happy breeze blowing and leading Splitstar the way. It was sort of ironic.

The familiar smells of Shadowclan crept into her mind without her noticing until she was practically at the entrance.

A deep and heavy mood hung over the forest and camp. Taking another way, Splitstar limped to her den, where there was a small space for her to squeeze into.

She tried to ignore the blood that trickled down onto the bushes and sand as she made her way into the cave.

Moongaze was there, curled in a ball and heaving great, shaky breaths. His whole body shook, and it took her a second to remember that she was presumed dead.

She cleared her voice, but Moongaze did not turn.

"Mintbreeze, I told you that I don't need your poppy seeds. I will sleep when death takes me and brings me back to my Splitrain."

She cleared her voice once more, and he turned over—

And stared.

"Splitrain?"

She could only smile and nod as he ran to her and halted in his tracks when he took her in completely. She did not know what her face looked like, but she knew she was not in good shape.

His breaths turned ragged.

"Oh Starclan, you'll be okay, don't worry, I'll go grab Mintbreeze and he can—"

She held up a tail to stop him.

His eyes were full of tears as he gave up after a moment and buried his nose into her neck, her shoulder, and looked her in the eyes.

He was becoming very foggy. Her paws disappeared from her body and she floated and sank all at once.

Moongaze gestured to the puddle that her fur had made in front of her.

"I hope you know I always thought you were beautiful. Because you wer— are."

Attempting to let out a purr, she peered down to the puddle below. With her vision as hazy as it was, she did not see much other than black fur and red blood, but the puddle grew. It grew and grew and Moongaze faded and she wanted to cry out but she couldn't feel her mouth or her body as she sank into oblivion, her mate's eyes the last thing she saw.

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Starclan stood and bowed their heads, mourning the cats now along the ranks of their dead.

There was one that should've been there but was not.

Starclan had more in store for her.

Epilogue- Coldpaw

Cold. Dark. This was no Starclan. There were towering, scraggly trees, the bare branches spiking into the sky — no sign of life to be found anywhere. There were only small sounds of rattling dried leaves against the wind. Black rot scattered the ground, leaving it damp and stagnant, accompanied with the odor of decomposing wood.

Memories whirled in Coldpaw's mind as she floated amid the dark sky; an endless void filled with lost souls drifting around, when suddenly the ground rushed to meet her.

With a spluttering cough, she jerked awake to find the breath knocked out of her. She choked, gasping to recover her breath. After a few heartbeats of panic, she slowly regained control of her breathing.

Coldpaw frowned, trying to make sense of what happened and where she was. The last thing she remembered was a light, the brightest light she'd ever seen... It all came back to her like a kick to the stomach. *Shadowclan. Riverclan. The war.* Coldpaw frantically glanced around, she had to get back to the battle! She couldn't just abandon her clan in the midst of a war!

She glanced at the dark ground, but not before something caught her eye. Her chest bore ugly, deep scars and her fur was flecked with dried blood. *So that's what that feeling was: the pain, the light, and then this.*

Breathing deeply, the little she-cat stifled a sob. She hadn't even gotten to say goodbye to her clan, to her family, to her brothers Pinepaw and Seedpaw. The cat who killed her showed no mercy when he attacked her, clawing and biting until she could no longer resist the pull of death.

Coldpaw shook her head vigorously, "...No, no, no! It's all just a dream, it—it has to be!" she wailed.

She couldn't stay here, she needed to find the other Starclan cats. But where was she? This place was obviously not Starclan... and it couldn't be the Dark Forest right? Coldpaw had done nothing bad in her short life, she was an innocent cat, so she couldn't possibly be in *that* horrible place.

The apprentice had a twinge of doubt however when she stared at her surroundings; the dark trees, the rot, and that *awful* smell. It was so similar to the elders' stories that used to be told to her as a kit when she had often wondered what the Dark Forest was like.

The elders explained to her that the Dark Forest was for very, very bad cats. Coldpaw had looked at them with her jaws gaped in interest and wonder back then, but now she was horrified. She'd done nothing bad! Yet, here she was.

Suddenly, a twig snapped behind her and she swiveled around with her fur bristling and tail bushed. "Who's there?" Coldpaw hissed, trembling with fear.

"Don't be scared, little one."

A cat came into view, stepping carefully out of the rotting undergrowth. His voice was laced with menace, "I've come to take you to the others. Come along," he purred before beginning to retreat back to the trees, obviously expecting Coldpaw to follow.

Coldpaw growled, "No, wait! Who are you? Where am I?"

"You know who I am, Coldpaw," the cat growled softly, his tone hinting impatience as he ignored her other question, "Now *come*. We have a lot of work to do."

Realization hit her like a stone; Coldpaw recognized the bluish, silvery pelt and the disgusting fishy aroma in an instant. She shuddered, remembering it all. The apprentice had no choice but to obey him, otherwise he might just kill her again.

Author's Note

Author's Note:

To my readers I dedicate this fan-fiction. Without you all I have no idea what this story would've become.

If you have any questions about this fan-fiction please DM me, and I will try my best to answer your questions.

Yes, Splitstar will make an appearance in my next story, and it is published on my profile under the title, "What is There to Say?"

If you have not already followed me as an author, I urge you to do so if you'd like notifications when I update my stories.

Again, I'd like to thank you all for putting up with me and my hectic updates, as well as supporting me and confirming that writing is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

'Till next time

Love you all,

Aqua~